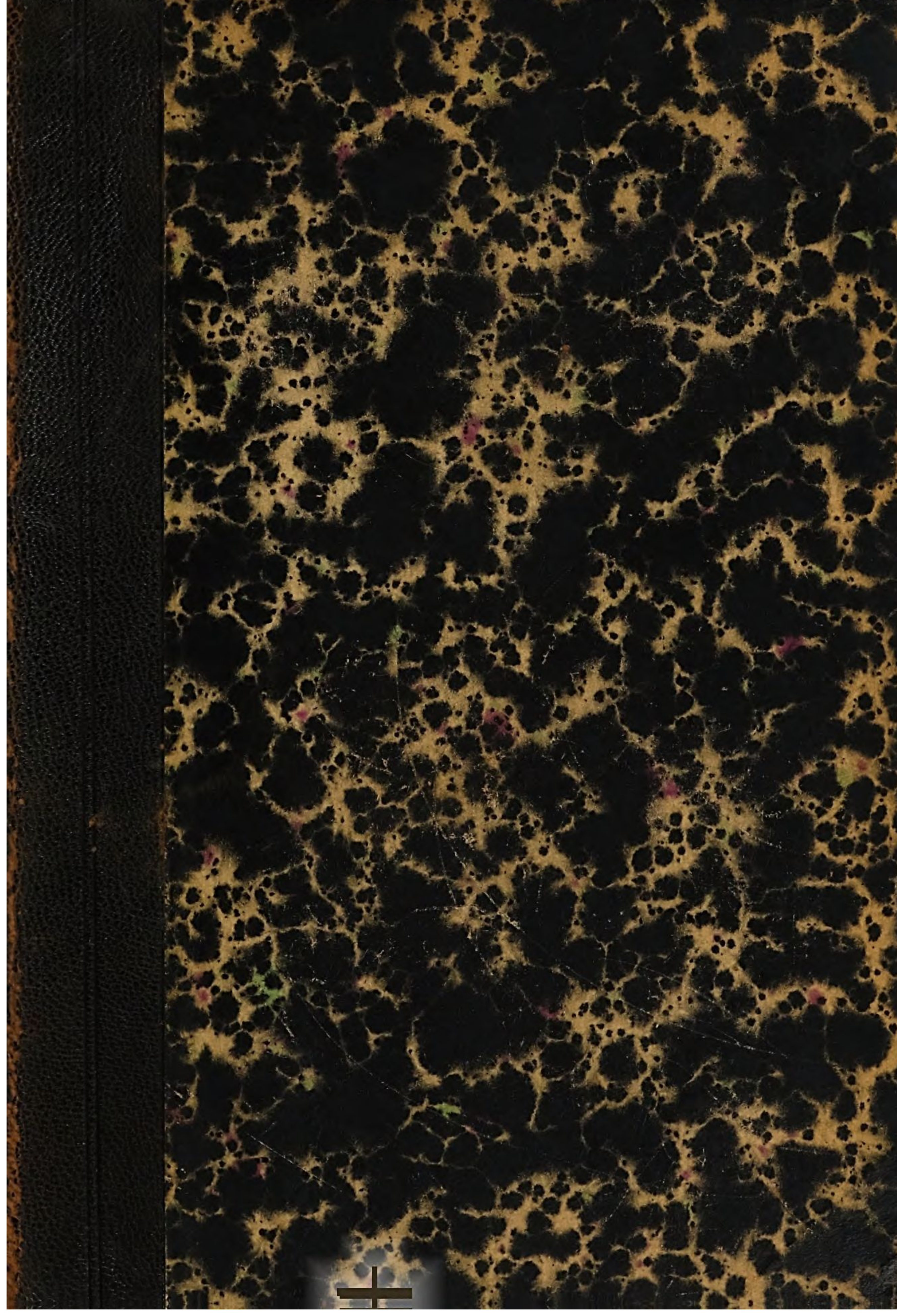






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**COLLECTION**  
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**VOL. 2837.**

**THE VENETIANS BY M. E. BRADDON.**  
**IN TWO VOLUMES.**

**VOL. 2.**

**LEIPZIG: BERNHARD TAUCHNITZ.**

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THE VENETIANS. BY M. E. BRADDON.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. II.



TO THE HONORABLE

THE SENATE OF THE UNITED STATES

IN SENATE

CONFIRMED

THE 15TH DAY OF MARCH 1871

BY THE SENATE

Yours truly,



# THE VENETIANS

A NOVEL

BY

M. E. BRADDON,

AUTHOR OF "LADY AUDLEY'S SECRET," ETC.

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IN TWO VOLUMES.

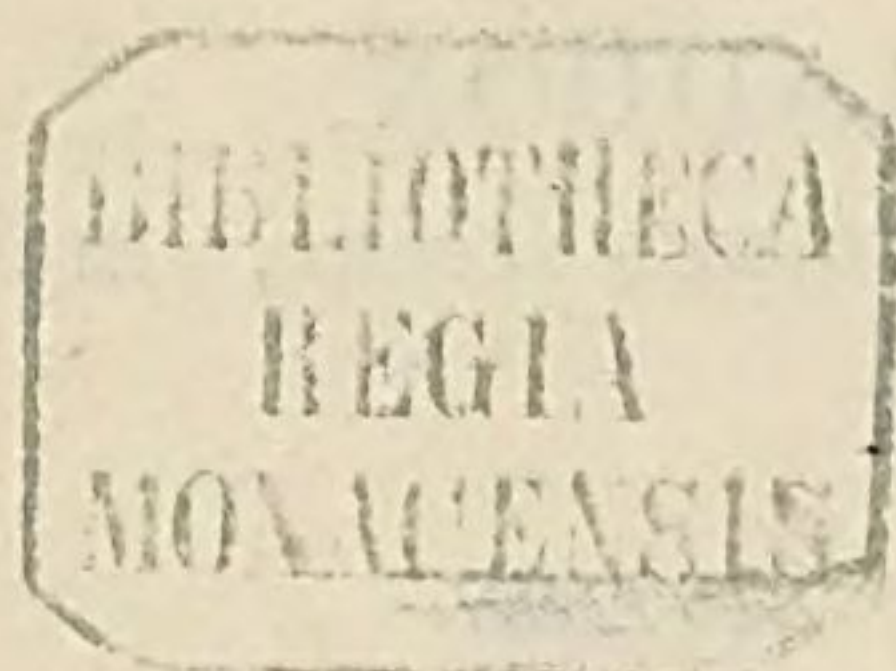
VOL. II.

LEIPZIG

BERNHARD TAUCHNITZ

1892.







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# THE VENETIANS.

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## CHAPTER I.

"SHE WAS MORE FAIR THAN WORDS CAN SAY."

IF Easter had been a time of happiness for Vansittart and Eve, bringing with it the revelation of mutual love, Whitsuntide was no less happy; happier, perhaps, in its serene security, and in the familiarity of a love which seemed to have lasted for a long time.

"Only seven weeks," exclaimed Eve, in one of their wanderings among the many cattle-tracks on Bexley Hill, no sound of life or movement in all the world around them save the hum of insects and the chime of cow bells. "To think that we have been engaged only seven weeks! It seems a long lifetime."

"Because you are so weary of me?" asked Vansittart, with a lover's fatuous smile.

"No; because our love is so colossal. How can it have grown so tremendous in so short a time?"

"Romeo and Juliet's love grew in a single night."

"Ah, that was in Italy—and for stage effect. I don't think much of a passion that springs up in a



night, like one of those great red fungi which one sees in this wood on an October morning. I should like our love to be as strong and as deep-rooted as that old oak over there, with its grey sprawling roots cleaving the ground."

"Why, so it is; or it will be by the time we celebrate our golden wedding."

"Our golden wedding! Yes, if we go on living we must be old and grey some day. It seems hard, doesn't it? How happy those Greek gods and goddesses were, to be for ever young. It seems hard that we must change from what we are now. I cannot think of myself as an old woman, in a black silk gown and a cap. A cap!" she interjected, with ineffable disgust, and an involuntary movement of her ungloved hand to the coils of bright hair which were shining uncovered in the sun. "And you with grey hair and wrinkles! Wrinkles in *your* face! That is what your favourite Spencer calls 'Unthinkable.' Stay"—looking at him searchingly in the merciless summer light. "Why, I declare there is just one wrinkle already. Just one perpendicular wrinkle! That means care, does it not?"

"What care can I have when I have you, except the fear of losing you?"

"Ah, you can have no such fear. I think, like Juliet, 'I should have had more cunning to be strange.' I let you see too soon that I adored you. I made myself very cheap."

"No more than the stars are cheap. We may all see them and worship them."

"But that deep perpendicular line, Jack. It must



mean something. I have been reading Darwin on Expression, remember."

"Spencer—Darwin. You are getting far too learned. I liked you better in your ignorance."

"How ignorant I was"—with a long-drawn sigh—"till you began to educate me. Poor dear Mütterchen never taught us anything but the multiplication table and a little French grammar. We used to devour Scott, and Dickens, and Bulwer, and Thackeray. The books on our shelves will tell you how they have been read. They have been done to rags with reading. They are dropping to pieces like over-boiled fowls. And we know our Shakespeare—we have learnt him by heart. We used to make our winter nights merry acting Shakespearean scenes to Nancy and the parlour-maid. They were our only audience. But, except those dear novelists and Shakespeare, we read nothing. History was a blank; philosophy a word without meaning. You introduced me to the world of books and learned authors."

"Was I wise? Was it not something like Satan's introduction of Eve to the apple?"

"Wise or foolish, you gave me Darwin. And now I want to know what kind of trouble it was that made that line upon your forehead. Some foolish love affair, perhaps. You were in love—ever so much deeper in love than you are with me."

"No, my dearest. All my earlier loves were lighter than vanity—no more than Romeo's boyish passion for that poor shadow Rosaline."

"What other care, then? You, who are so rich, can have no money cares."

"Can I not? Imprimis, I am not rich; and then



what income I have is derived chiefly from agricultural land cut up into smallish farms, with homesteads, and barns, and cowhouses, that seem always ready to tumble about the tenant's ears, unless I spend half the annual rent in repairs."

"Dear, picturesque old homesteads, I've no doubt."

"Eminently picturesque, but very troublesome to own."

"And did repairs—the cost of new thatch and new drainpipes—write that deep line on your brow?"

"Perhaps. Or it may be only a habit of frowning, and of trying to emulate the eagles in looking at the sun."

"Ah, you have been a wanderer in sunny lands, in Italy. And now we had better go and look for the girls."

They roamed over Bexley Hill or Blackdown during that happy Whitsuntide, favoured with weather that made these Sussex hills a paradise. It was the season of hawthorn blossom, and an undulating line of white May bushes came dancing down the hill like a bridal procession. It was the season of blue-bells; and all the woodland hollows were lakelets of azure bloom, luminous in sunlight, darkly purple in shadow; the season of blossoming trees in cottage gardens, of the laburnum's golden rain, the acacia's perfumed whiteness, the tossing balls of the guelder-rose, the mauve blossoms of wistaria glorifying the humblest walls, the small white woodbine scenting the balmy air. It was a season that seemed especially invented for youth and love; for the young foals sporting in the meadow; for the young lambs on the grassy hills; and for Eve and Vansittart.



They almost lived out of doors in this delicious weather. The four sisters were always ready to bear them company, and were always discreet enough to leave them alone for the greater part of every rambling expedition. Mr. Tivett had re-appeared on the scene. He had been particularly useful in London, where he was full of information about the very best places for buying everything, from a diamond bracelet to a tooth-brush, and had insisted upon taking Eve and Lady Hartley to some of his favourite shops, and upon having a voice in a great many of their purchases. He took as much interest in Eve's trousseau as if he had been her maiden aunt.

The wedding was to be the simplest ceremonial possible. Neither Vansittart nor Eve wished to parade their bliss before a light-minded multitude. The Homestead was not a house in which to entertain a mixed company; and Colonel Marchant was not a man to make a fuss about anything in life except his own comfort. He ordered a frock-coat, and got himself a new hat for the occasion; and the faithful Yorkshire Nancy, cook, housekeeper, and general manager, toiled for a week of industrious days in order that the house might be in faultless order, and the light collation worthy of the chosen who were invited to the wedding. There were to be no hired waiters, no stereotyped banquet from the confectioner's, only tea and coffee, champagne of a famous brand—upon this the Colonel insisted—and such cakes and biscuits and delicate sandwiches as Nancy knew well how to prepare. For bridesmaids, Eve had her four sisters, all in white frocks, and carrying big bunches of Maréchal Niel roses. Hetty and



Peggy had been in ecstatic expectation of the day for a month, and full of speculation as to what manner of present the bridegroom would give them. They squabbled about this question almost every night at bed-time, under the sloping roof of the attic which they occupied together, close to the overhanging thatch where there was such a humming and buzzing of summer insects in the June mornings.

"He is bound to give us a present," said Peggy. "It's etiquette"—accentuating the first syllable.

"You should say *etiquette*," reproved Hetty. "Lady Hartley lays a stress upon the *kett*."

"Don't bother about pronunciation," muttered Peggy; "one can never get on with one's talk when you're so fine-ladyfied."

"Pronunciation!" cried Hetty. "You pick up your language from Susan. No wonder Sophy is horrified at you."

"Sophy is too fine for anything. Mr. Vansittart said so yesterday when she gave herself airs at the picnic, because there were no table napkins. I wonder what the present will be! He's so rich, he's sure to give us something pretty. Suppose he gives us watches?"

A watch was the dream of Peggy's life. She thought the difference between no watch and watch was the difference between a joyless humdrum existence and a life of exquisite bliss.

"Suppose he doesn't," exclaimed her sister, contemptuously. "Did you ever hear of a bridegroom giving watches? Of course, the bridesmaids are supposed to have watches. Their fathers give them watches



directly they are in their teens, unless they are hard-up, like our father. I shouldn't wonder if he were to give us diamond arrow brooches."

Hetty had seen a diamond arrow in Lady Hartley's bonnet-strings, and had conceived a passion for that form of ornament.

"What do you bet that it will be diamond arrows?"

"There's no use in betting with you. If you lose, one never gets paid."

"I don't often have any money," Peggy replied naively; and then came a knocking at the lath and plaster partition, and Sophy's sharp voice remonstrating—

"Are you children never going to leave off chattering? You are worse than the swallows in the morning."

There was one blissfullest of days for Peggy during the week before the wedding, a balmy June morning on which Vansittart came in a dog-cart to take Eve and her youngest sister to Haslemere station, whence the train carried them through a smiling land, perfumed with bean blossoms and those fragrant spices which pine woods exhale under the summer sun, to Liss, where another dog-cart was waiting for them, and whence they drove past copse and common to Merewood, Vansittart's very own house, to which he brought his future wife on a visit of inspection—"to see if she would like any alterations," he said.

"As if any one could want to alter such a lovely house," exclaimed Peggy, who was allowed to run about and pry into every hole and corner, and open all the wardrobes and drawers, except in Mrs. Vansittart's rooms,



where everything was looked at with an almost religious reverence.

There were boxes packed already in this lady's dressing-room, the note of departure already sounded.

"My mother talks of a house at Brighton," said Vansittart. "She has a good many friends settled there, and the winter climate suits her."

"I am sorry she should feel constrained to go away," said Eve, looking ruefully round the spacious bedroom, with its three French windows opening on to a wide balcony, a room which could have swallowed up half the Homestead. "It seems as if I were turning her out. And I am sure there would have been ample room for both of us in this big house."

"So I told her, love; but English mothers don't take kindly to the idea of a joint ménage. She will come to us often as our guest, I have no doubt, but she insists upon giving up possession to you and me."

They loitered in all the lower rooms, drawing-room and ante-room, morning-room, library, billiard-room—an unpretentious country house, spread over a good deal of ground, roomy, airy, beautifully lighted, but boasting no art collections, no treasures of old books, unpretentiously furnished after the fashion of a century ago, and with only such modern additions as comfort required. The drawing-room would have appeared shabby to eyes fresh from modern drawing-rooms; but the colouring was harmonious, and the room was made beautiful by the abundance of flowers on tables, chimney-piece, and cabinets.

"I dare say you would like to refurnish this room by-and-by," said Vansittart.



"Not for worlds. I would not change one detail that can remind you of your childhood. I remember the drawing-room in Yorkshire, and how dearly I loved the sofas and easy-chairs—the glass cabinets of old blue china. It would grieve me to go back and see strange furniture in that dear old room; and I love to think that your eyes looked at these things when they were only on a level with that table"—pointing to a low table with a great bowl of roses upon it.

"Not my eyes alone, but my father's and grandfather's eyes have looked from yonder low level. I am glad you don't mind the shabby furniture. I confess to a weakness for the old sticks."

"Shabby furniture!" repeated Eve. "One would think you were going to marry a princess. Why, this house is a palace compared with the Homestead; and yet I have contrived to be happy even in the Homestead."

"Because Heaven has given you one of its choicest gifts—a happy disposition," said Vansittart. "It is that happy temperament which irradiates your beauty. It is not that tip-tilted little nose, so slender in the bridge, so ethereal in its upward curve, nor yet those violet eyes, which make you so lovely. It is the happy soul for ever singing to itself, like the lark up yonder in the fathomless blue."

"I shouldn't think you cared for me, if you didn't talk nonsense sometimes," answered Eve, gaily; "but it is a privilege to be happy, isn't it? Sophy and I have had the same troubles to bear, but they have hurt her ever so much more than they hurt me. Jenny and I sometimes call her Mrs. Gummidge. I think it is be-



cause she has never left off struggling to be smart, never left off thinking that we ought to be on the same level as the county families; while Jenny and I gave up the battle at once, and confessed to each other frankly that we were poor and shabby, and the daughters of a scampish father. And so we have managed to be happy. I love to think that I am like Beatrice, and that I was born under a star that danced."

"You were born under a star that brought me good luck."

They were in the flower-garden, a delightful old garden of deep soft turf and old herbaceous borders, a garden brimful of roses, standard roses and climbing roses and dwarf roses, arches of roses that made the blue sky beyond look bluer, alleys shaded with roses, like the vine-clad berceaux of Italy. It was a garden shut in by walls of cypress and yew, and so secluded as to make an *al fresco* drawing-room for summer habitation; a drawing-room in which one could breakfast or dine, without fear of being espied by any one approaching the hall door.

Eve was enchanted with her new home. She poured out her confidence to him who was so soon to be her husband, with the right to know her inmost thoughts, her every impulse or fancy. It was not often that she talked of herself; but to-day she was full of personal reminiscences, and Vansittart encouraged her innocent egotism.

"I don't think you realize that you are playing the part of King Cophetua, and marrying a beggar-maiden," she said. "I don't think you can have any idea what a struggle my life has been since I was twelve years



old—how that dear Nancy and I have had to scheme and manage, in order to feed four hungry girls. You remember how Hetty and Peggy giggled when you talked about dinner. We scarcely ever had a meal which you and Lady Hartley would call dinner. We were vegetarians half our time—we abstained when it wasn't Lent. We had our Ember days all the year round. Oh, pray don't look so horrified. We had the kind of food we liked. Vegetable soups, and savoury stews, and salads, cakes and buns, bread and jam. We had meals that we all enjoyed tremendously—only we could not have asked a dropper-in to stay and lunch or dine—could we? So it was lucky people took so little notice of us."

"My darling, you were the pearls, and your neighbours were the swine."

"And then our dress. How could we be stylish or tailor-made girls when a ten-pound note once in a way was all we could extort from father for the whole flock? Ten pounds! Lady Hartley would pay as much for a bonnet as would buy gowns for all five of us. And then you bring me to this delicious old house—so spacious, so dignified, with such a settled air of wealth and comfort—and you ask if I can suggest any improvements in things which to my mind are perfect."

"My dearest, I want you to be happy, and very happy; and to feel that this house is your house, to deal with as you please."

"I only want to live in it, with you," she answered shyly, "and not to disappoint you. What should I do if King Cophetua were to repent his too-generous marriage, and were to think of all the brilliant matches he might have made?"



“When we are settled here I will show you the girls my mother would have liked me to marry, and you will see that they are not particularly brilliant. And I do not even know if any of them would have accepted me, had I been minded to offer myself.”

“They could not have refused you. No one could. To know you is to adore you. Come, Jack, you have been talking rodomontade to me. It is my turn now. You are not extraordinarily handsome. I suppose, as a sober matter of fact, Mr. Sefton is handsomer. Don’t wince at the sound of his name. You know I have always detested him. I doubt if you are even exceptionally clever—but you have a kind of charm—you creep into a girl’s heart unawares. I pity the woman who loved you, and whom you did not love.”

Vansittart thought of Fiordelisa. Perhaps in every man’s life there comes one such ordeal as that—love cast at his feet, love worthless to him; but true love all the same, and the most precious of all earthly feelings in the abstract.

Eve Marchant’s wedding gifts were few but costly. She had no wide circle of friends and acquaintances to shower feather fans and ivory paper-knives, standard lamps and silver boxes, teapots and cream-jugs, fruit spoons and carriage clocks upon her, till she sat among her treasures, bewildered and oppressed, like Tarpeia under the rain of iron from rude warrior hands. Neighbours had stood aloof from the family at the Homestead, and could hardly come to the front with gifts in their hands, now that the slighted girl was going to marry a man of some standing in an adjoining county,



and to take her place for ever among the respectabilities. The givers therefore were few, but the gifts were worthy. Mrs. Vansittart gave the pearl necklace which she had worn at her own bridal—a single string of perfect pearls, with a diamond clasp that had been in the family for a century and a half. Lady Hartley gave her future sister-in-law a set of diamond stars worthy to blaze in the fashionable firmament on a Drawing-Room day. Sir Hubert gave a three-quarter bred mare of splendid shape and remarkable power, perfect as hack or hunter, on whose back Eve had already taken her first lessons in equitation. And for the bridegroom! His gifts were of the choicest and the best considered; jewels, toilet nécessaire, travelling bag, books innumerable. He watched for every want, anticipated every fancy.

"Pray, pray don't spoil me," cried Eve. "You make me feel so horribly selfish. You load me with gifts, and you say you are not rich. You are ruining yourself for me."

"A man can afford to ruin himself once in his life for his nearest and dearest," he answered gaily. "Besides, if I give you all you want now, I shall cure you of any incipient tendency to extravagance."

"I have no such tendency. My nose has been kept too close to the grindstone of poverty."

"Poor, pretty little nose! Happily the grindstone has not hurt it."

"And as for wants, who said I wanted Tennyson and Browning bound in vellum, or a travelling bag as big as a house? I have no wants, or they are all centred upon one object, which isn't to be bought with money. I want you and your love."



"I and my love are yours—have been yours since that night in the snowy road, when you entered into my life at a flash, like the sunlight through Newton's shutter, like Undine, like Titania."

One of the few wedding presents was embarrassing alike to bride and bridegroom, for it came from a man whom both disliked, but whom one of the two would rather not offend.

Eve's appearance in the family sitting-room just a little later than usual one morning was loudly hailed by Hetty and Peggy, who were squabbling over a small parcel which had arrived, registered and insured, by the morning post.

"It is a jeweller's box in the shape of a crescent," cried Peggy. "It must be a crescent brooch. How too utterly lovely! But it is not from Mr. Vansittart."

They called him Mr. Vansittart still, although he had begged them to call him Jack.

"It would be too awfully free and easy to call so superb a gentleman by such a vulgar name," Hetty said, when the subject came under discussion.

"I say it is from Mr. Vansittart," protested Hetty. "Who else would send her a diamond crescent?"

"How do you know it's diamonds?"

"Oh, of course. Bridegrooms always give diamonds. Did you ever see anything else in the weddings in the *Lady's Pictorial*?"

"Bother the *Lady's Pictorial*! it ain't his handwriting."

"Ain't it, stupid? Who said it was? It's the



jeweller's writing, of course—with Mr. Vansittart's card inside."

"Perhaps you will allow me to open the parcel, and see what it all means," said Eve, with the eldest sister's dignity.

The two young barbarians had had the breakfast-table to themselves, Sophy and Jenny not having appeared. There were certain operations with spirit-lamp and tongs which made these young ladies later than the unsophisticated juniors.

"I shall scold him savagely for sending me this, after what I told him yesterday," said Eve, as she tore open the carefully sealed parcel.

She was of Hetty's opinion. The gift could be from none but her lover.

"Oh, oh, oh!" they cried, all three of them, in a chorus of rapture, as the box was opened.

The crescent was of sapphires, deeply, darkly, beautifully blue, without flaw or feather. Small brilliants filled in the corners between the stones, but these hardly showed in that blue depth and darkness. The effect was of a solemn, almost mysterious splendour. It was a jewel such as Cleopatra might have worn, clasping a mantle of white and gold upon a peerless bust. It was beautiful enough for the loveliest wearer, costly enough for the greatest among royal ladies.

"Oh, how wicked, how wilful of him, to waste such a fortune upon me!" cried Eve, taking the crescent out of its white velvet bed.

Under the jewel, like the asp under the fig-leaves, there lay a visiting-card.

"From Mr. Sefton, with all best wishes."



Eve dropped the brooch as if it had stung her.

"From him?" she cried. "How horrid!"

"I call it utterly charming of him," protested Hetty, who had adopted as many of Lady Hartley's phrases as her memory would hold. "We all know that he admired you, and I think it too sweet of him to show that he bears no malice now that you are marrying somebody else. Had he sent you anything paltry—fish-knives or a scent-bottle, for instance—I should have loathed him. But such a present as this, so simple yet so *distingué*, in such perfect taste——"

"Cease your raptures, Hetty, for mercy's sake!" cried Eve, wrapping the jewel-box in the crumpled paper, and tying the string round it rather roughly. "Would you accept any gift from a man you hate?"

"It would depend upon the gift. I wouldn't advise my worst enemy to try me with a sapphire crescent—such sapphires as those!"

"You are a mighty judge of sapphires!" said Eve, contemptuously; after which unkind remark she ate her breakfast of bread and butter and home-made marmalade in moody silence. And it was a rare thing for Eve to be silent or moody.

Vansittart's step was heard upon the gravel before the curling-tongs were done with in the upper story, and Eve ran out to the porch to meet him, with the jeweller's parcel in her hand. They walked about the garden together, between rows of blossoming peas and feathery asparagus, by borders of roses and homely pinks, talking of Sefton and his gift. Eve wanted to send it back to the giver.

"I can decline it upon the ground that I don't ap-



prove of wedding presents except from one's own and one's bridegroom's kindred," she said. "I won't be uncivil."

"I fear he would think the return of his gift uncivil, however sweetly you might word your refusal. Wedding gifts are such a customary business; it is an unheard-of act to send one back. No, Eve, I fear you must keep the thing," with a tone of disgust; "but you need not wear it."

"Wear it! I should think not! Of course I shall obey you; but I hate the idea of being under an obligation to Mr. Sefton, who—well, who always made me feel more than any one else that I wasn't one of the elect. His friendliness was more humiliating than other people's stand-offishness. I wonder you mind offending him, Jack. I know you don't like him."

"No; but he is my sister's neighbour; and he and the Hartleys are by way of being friendly."

"Ah, I see! That is a reason. I wouldn't for the world do anything to make Lady Hartley feel uncomfortable. He might go to her and tax her with having an unmannerly young woman for a sister-in-law. So I suppose I must write a pretty little formal letter to thank him for his most exquisite gift, the perfect taste of which is only equalled by his condescension in remembering such an outsider as Colonel Marchant's daughter. Something to that effect, but not quite in those words."

She broke into gay laughter, the business being settled, and lifted herself on tiptoe to offer her rosy lips to Vansittart's kiss; and all the invisible fairies in the peaseblossom, and all the microscopic Cupids lurk-



ing among the rose leaves, beheld that innocent kiss and laughed their noiseless laugh in sympathy with these true lovers.

"I have a good mind," said Eve, as she ran back to the house, "to give Peggy the blue crescent to fasten her pinafore."

The wedding at Fernhurst Cottage was as pretty a wedding as any one need care to see, although it was a ceremony curtailed of all those surroundings which make weddings worthy to be recorded in the Society papers. There was no crowd of smart people, no assemblage of smart gowns stamped with the man mantua-maker's cachet, and marking the latest development of fashion. No long train of carriages choked the narrow rural road, or filled the little valley with clouds of summer dust. Only the kindred of bride and bridegroom were present; but even these made a gracious group in the village church, while the music of the rustic choir and the school children with their baskets of roses were enough to give a joyous and bridal aspect to the scene.

Eve, in her severely simple satin gown, with no ornaments save the string of pearls round her full firm throat, and the natural orange blossoms in her bright hair, was a vision of youthful grace and beauty that satisfied every eye, and made the handsome bridegroom in all his height, and breadth, and manly strength, a mere accessory, hardly worth notice. The four sisters, in their gauzy white frocks and Gainsborough hats, when clustered in a group at the church door, might have suggested four cherubic heads looking out of a



fleecy cloud, so fresh and bright were the young faces, in the unalloyed happiness of the occasion—happiness almost supernal, for in defiance of conventionality, and perhaps divining, or overhearing, Peggy's desire, the bridegroom had given them watches, dainty little watches, with an "E" in brilliants upon each golden back—E, for Eve; E, for Ecstasy; E, for Everlasting bliss! Peggy felt she had nothing more to ask of life. And for spectators who need have wished a friendlier audience than honest Yorkshire Nancy, and the cottagers who had seen Eve Marchant grow up in their midst, and had experienced many kindnesses from her—the cottagers whose children she had taught in the Sunday School, whose old people she had comforted on their death-beds, and for whose sake she had often stinted herself in order to take a jug of good soup, or a milk pudding, to a sick child?

Colonel Marchant made a dignified figure at the altar, in a frock-coat extorted from the reviving confidence of a tailor, who saw hope in Miss Marchant's marriage. He did all that was required of him with the grace of a man who, in a long association with scamps, had not forgotten the habits of good society. The modest collation at the Homestead was a success; for everybody was in good spirits and good appetite. Even Mrs. Vansittart was now content with a marriage which gave her son so fair and lovable a bride, content to believe that, whatever evil Harold Marchant might have done upon the earth, no shadow from his dark past need ever fall across his innocent sister's pathway.

And so in a great clash of joy bells, and in a shower of rice from girlish hands, Eve and Vansittart ran down



the steep garden path to the carriage which was to take them to Haslemere, whence they were going to Salisbury, on the first stage of their journey to that rock-bound coast

“Where that great vision of the guarded mount  
Looks o’er Namancos and Bayona’s hold.”

## CHAPTER II.

“THE SHADOW PASSETH WHEN THE TREE SHALL FALL.”

WHAT a happy honeymoon it was, along the porphyry walls of Western England; what joyous days that were so long and seemed so short to those two revellers in the sea, and the sunshine, and the scent of those poor wild flowers that grow on the lips of the ocean. There never was a less costly honeymoon, for the bride’s tastes were simple to childishness, and the bridegroom was too deeply in love to care for anything she did not desire. To ramble on that romantic shore, staying here a few days, and there a week, all along the wild north coast, from Tintagel to St. Ives, southward then to Penzance, and Falmouth, and Fowey, was more than enough for bliss. And yet in all Eve’s childish talk with her sisters of what she would do if ever she married a rich man, the honeymoon tour in Italy had been a leading feature in her programme; but in those girlish visions beside the school-room fire the husband had been a nonentity, a mere purse-bearer, and all her talk had been of the places she was to see. Now, with this very real husband, fondly, poetically dear, all earth was paradisaic, and Penzance was not one whit less lovely than Naples.



She was exquisitely happy; and what can the human mind require beyond perfect bliss?

These wedded lovers lingered long over that summer holiday. It was a glorious summer—a summer of sunshine and cloudless skies, varied only by the inevitable thunderstorm—tempest enjoyed by Vansittart and Eve, who loved Nature in her grand and awful as well as in her milder aspects—and a tempest from the heights above Boscastle, or from the grassy cliffs of the Lizard, is a spectacle to remember. They spun out the pleasures of that simple Cornish tour. There was nothing to call them home—no tie, no duty, only their own inclination; for the dowager Mrs. Vansittart was staying at Redwold, absorbed in worship of the third generation, and was to go from Redwold to Ireland for a round of visits to the friends of her early married life. The lovers were therefore free to prolong their wanderings, and it was only when the shortening days suggested fireside pleasures that Vansittart proposed going home.

“Going home,” cried Eve; “how sweet that sounds. To think that your home is to be my home for evermore; and the servants, your old, well-trained servants, will be bobbing to me as their mistress—I who never had any servant but dear old motherly Nancy, who treats me as if I were her own flesh and blood, and an untaught chit for a parlour-maid, a girl who was always dropping knives off her tray, or smashing the crockery, in a most distracting manner. We had only the cheapest things we could buy at Whiteley’s sales, with a few relics of former splendour; and it was generally the relics that suffered. I cannot imagine myself the mistress of a fine house, with a staff of capable servants.



What an insignificant creature I shall seem among them!"

"You will seem a queen—a queen out of the great kingdom of poetry—a queen like Tennyson's Maud, in a white frock, with roses in your hair, and an ostrich fan for a sceptre. Don't worry about the house, Eve. It will govern itself. The servants are all old servants, and have been trained by my mother, whose laws are the laws of Draco. Everything will work by machinery, and you and I can live in the same happy idleness we have tasted here."

"Can we? May we, do you think? Is it not a wicked life? We care only for ourselves; we think only of ourselves."

"Oh, we can mend that in some wise. I'll introduce you to all my cottage tenants; and you will find plenty of scope for your benevolence in helping them through their troubles and sicknesses. You can start a village reading-room; you can start—or revive—a working man's club. You shall be Lady Bountiful—a young and blooming Bountiful—not dealing in herbs and medicines, but in tea, and wine, and sago puddings, and chicken broth; finding frocks for the children, and Sunday bonnets for the mothers—flashing across poverty's threshold like a ray of sunshine."

Life that seems like a happy dream seldom lasts very long. There is generally some kind of rough awakening. Fate comes like the servant bidden to call us of a morning, and shakes the sleeper by the shoulder. The happy dream vanishes through the ivory gate, and the waking world in all its harsh reality is there.



Eve's awakening came in a most unexpected shape. It came one October morning in the first week of her residence at Merewood. It came in a letter from the old servant Nancy, a letter in a shabby envelope, lying hidden among that heap of letters, monogrammed, coronetted, fashionable, which lay beside Mrs. Vansittart's plate when she took her seat at the breakfast table.

She left that letter for the last, not recognizing Nancy's penmanship, an article of which the faithful servant had always been sparing. Eve read all those other trivial letters—invitations, acceptances, friendly little communications of no meaning—and commented upon them to her husband as he took his breakfast—and then finally she opened Nancy's letter. It was October, and Vansittart was dressed for shooting. October, yet there was no house-party. Eve had pleaded for a little more of that dual solitude which husband and wife had both found so delightful; and Vansittart had been nothing loth to indulge her whim. November would be time enough to invite his friends; and in the mean time they had their pine woods and copses and common all to themselves; and Eve could tramp about the covers with him when he went after his pheasants, without feeling herself in anybody's way. October had begun charmingly, with weather that was balmy and bright enough for August. They were breakfasting with windows open to the lawn and flower-beds, and the bees were buzzing among the dahlias, and the air was scented with the Dijon roses that covered the wall.

"Why, it is from Nancy," exclaimed Eve, looking at



the signature. "Dear old Nancy. What can she have to write about?"

"Read, Eve, read," cried Vansittart. "I believe Nancy's letter will be more interesting than all those inanities you have been reading to me. There is sure to be some touch of originality, even if it is only in the spelling."

Eve's eyes had been hurrying over the letter while he spoke.

"Oh, Jack," she exclaimed, in a piteous voice, "can there be any truth in this?"

The letter was as follows, in an orthography which need not be reproduced:—

"HONOURED MADAM,

"I should not take the liberty to write to you about dear Miss Peggy, only at Miss Sophy's and Miss Jenny's age they can't be expected to know anything about illness, and I'm afraid they may pass things over till it's too late to mend matters, and then I know you would blame your old servant for not having spoken out."

"What an alarming preamble," said Jack. "What does it all mean?"

"It means that Peggy is very ill. Peggy, who seemed the strongest of all of us."

She went on reading the letter.

"You know what beautiful weather we had after your marriage, honoured Madam. The young ladies enjoyed being out of doors all day long, and all the evening, sometimes till bed-time. They seldom had dinner indoors. It was 'Picnic basket, Nancy,' every morning, and I had to make them Cornish pasties—any



scraps of meat were good enough so long as there was plenty of pie-crust—and fruit turnovers; and off they used to go to the copses and the hills directly after breakfast. They were all sunburnt, and they all looked so well, no one could have thought any harm would come of it. But Miss Peggy she used to run about more than her sisters, and she used to get into dreadful perspirations, as Miss Hetty told me afterwards, and then, standing or sitting about upon those windy hills, no doubt she got a chill. Even when she came home, with the perspiration teeming down her dear little face, she didn't like the tew of changing all her clothes, and I was too busy in the kitchen—cooking, or cleaning, or washing—to look much after the poor dear child, and so it came upon me as a surprise in the middle of August when I found what a bad cold she had got. I did all I could to cure her. You know, dear Miss Eve, that I'm a pretty good nurse—indeed, I helped to nurse your poor dear ma every winter till she went abroad—but, in spite of all my mustard poultices and hot foot-baths, this cold and cough have been hanging about Miss Peggy for more than six weeks, and she doesn't get any better. Miss Sophy sent for the doctor about a month ago, and he told her to keep the child warmly clad, and not to let her go out in an east wind, and he sent her a mixture, and he called two or three times, and then he didn't call any more. But Miss Peggy's cough is worse than it was when the doctor saw her, and the winter will be coming on soon, and I can't forget that her poor ma died of consumption: so I thought the best thing I could do was to write freely to you.—Your faithful friend and servant, NANCY."



"Died of consumption!" The words came upon Vansittart like the icy hand of Death himself, taking hold of his heart.

"Is that true, Eve?" he asked. "Did your mother die of consumption?"

"I never heard exactly what her complaint was. She was far away from us when she died. I remember she always had a cough in the winter, and she had to be very careful of herself—or, at least, people told her she ought to be careful. She seemed to fade away, and I thought her grief about Harold had a good deal to do with her early death."

"Ah, that was it, no doubt. It was grief killed her. Her son's exile, her change of fortune, were enough to kill a sensitive woman. She died of a broken heart."

Anything! He would believe anything rather than accept the idea of that silent impalpable enemy threatening his beloved—the horror of hereditary consumption—the shadow that walketh in noonday.

"My sweet Peggy!" cried Eve, with brimming eyes. "I have been home a week, and I have not been to see my sisters—only an hour's journey by road and rail! It is nearly three months since I saw them, and we were never parted before in all our lives. May I go to-day—at once, Jack? I shall be miserable——"

"Till you have discovered a mare's nest, which I hope and believe Nancy's letter will prove," her husband interjected soothingly. "Yes, dear, we'll go to Haslemere by the first train that will carry us, and we'll telegraph for a fly to take us on to Fernhurst. There shall not be a minute lost. You shall have Peggy in your arms



before lunch-time. Dear young Peggy! Do you suppose she is not precious to me, as well as to you? I promised I would be to her as a brother. Your sisters are my sisters, Eve."

He rang the bell at the beginning of his speech, and ordered the dog-cart at the end.

"We must catch the London train, at 10.15," he told the footman. "Let them bring round the cart as soon as it can be got ready. And now, dearest, your hat and jacket, and I am with you."

There was comfort in this prompt action. Eve tore up-stairs, threw on the first hat she could find, too eager to ring for her maid, with whose attendance she was always willing to dispense, as an altogether novel and not always pleasant sensation. She came flying down to the hall ten minutes before the cart drove round, and she and Vansittart walked up and down in front of the porch, talking of the sisters, she breathless and with fast-beating heart, protesting more than once at the slowness of the grooms.

"My dearest, for pity's sake be calm. Why should you think the very worst, only because Nancy is an alarmist? These people are always full of ghoulis imaginations. Peasants gloat over the idea of sickness and death. They will stab one to the heart unwittingly; they will look at one's nearest and dearest, and say, 'Poor Miss So-and-so does not look as if she was long for this world.' Long for this world, forsooth! Thank Heaven the threatened life often outlasts the prophet's. Come, here is the cart. Jump in, Eve. The drive through the fresh air will revive your spirits."

She was certainly in better spirits by the time the



cart drew up at the railway station, and in better spirits all the way to Haslemere; but it was her husband's hopefulness rather than the crisp autumnal air which revived her. Yes, she would take comfort. Jack was right. Nancy was the best of creatures, but very apt to dwell upon the darker aspects of life, and to prophesy evil.

Yes, Jack was right; for scarcely had the fly drawn up at the little gate when Peggy came dancing down the steep garden path, with outstretched arms, and wild hair flying in the wind, and legs much too long for her short petticoats, that very Peggy whom Eve's fearful imaginings had depicted stretched on a sick-bed, faint almost to speechlessness. No speechlessness about this Peggy, the real flesh and blood Peggy, whose arms were round Eve's neck before she had begun the ascent of the pathway, whose voice was greeting her vociferously, and who talked unintermittingly, without so much as a comma, till they were in the school-room. The arms that clung so lovingly were very skinny, and the voice was somewhat hoarse; but the hoarseness was no doubt only the consequence of running fast, and the skinniness was the normal condition of a growing girl. Yes, Peggy had grown during her sister's long honeymoon. There was decidedly an inch or so more leg under the short skirts.

Eve wept aloud for very joy, as she sat on the sofa with Peggy on her lap—the dear old Yorkshire sofa—the sofa that had been a ship, an express train, a smart barouche, an opera-box, and ever so many other things, years ago, in their childish play. She could not restrain her tears as she thought of that terrible vision of a



dying Peggy, and then clasped this warm, joyous, living Peggy closer and closer to her heart. The other sisters had gone to a morning service. She had this youngest all to herself for a little while.

"I don't go to church on weekdays now," said Peggy, "only on Sundays. It makes my chest ache to sit so long."

Ah, that was like the dull sudden sound of the death-bell.

"That's because you're growing so fast, Peg," said Vansittart's cheery voice. "Growing girls are apt to be weak. I shall send you some port which will soon make you sit up straight."

"You needn't trouble," said Peggy. "I could swim in port if I liked. Sir Hubert sent a lot for me—the finest old wine in his cellar—just because Lady Hartley happened to say I was growing too fast. And they have sent grapes, and game, and all sorts of delicious things from Redwold, only because I grow too fast. It's a fine thing for all of us that I grow so fast—ain't it, Eve?—for, of course, I can't eat all the grapes or the game."

Peggy looked from wife to husband, with a joyous laugh. She had red spots on her hollow cheeks, and her eyes were very bright. Vansittart heard the death-bell as he looked at her.

The sisters came trooping in, having seen the fly at the door and guessed its meaning. They were rapturous in their greetings, had worlds to say about themselves and their neighbours, and were more eager to talk of their own experiences than to hear about Eve's Cornish wanderings.



"You should just see how the people suck up to us, now you are Lady Hartley's sister-in-law," said Hetty, and was immediately silenced for vulgarity, and to make way for her elder sisters.

Vansittart left them all clustered about Eve, and all talking together. He went out into the garden—the homely mixed garden of shrubs and fruit and flowers and vegetables, garden which now wore its autumnal aspect of over-ripeness verging on decay, rosy-red tomatoes hanging low upon the fence, with flabby yellowing leaves, vegetable marrows grown out of knowledge, and cucumbers that prophesied bitterness, cabbage stumps, withering bean-stalks—a wilderness of fennel: everywhere the growth that presages the end of all growing, and the beginning of winter's death-sleep.

It was not to muse upon decaying Nature that Vansittart had come out among the rose and carnation borders, the patches of parsley and mint. He had a purpose in his sauntering, and made his way to the back of the straggling, irregular cottage, where the long-tiled roof of the kitchen and offices jutted out from under the thatch. Here through the open casement he saw Yorkshire Nancy bustling about in the clean, bright kitchen, her pupil and slave busy cleaning vegetables at the sink, and a shoulder of lamb slowly revolving before the ruddy coal fire—an honest, open fireplace. "None of your kitcheners for me," Nancy was wont to say, with a scornful emphasis which recalled the fox in his condemnation of unattainable grapes.

Vansittart looked in at the window.

"May I have a few words with you, Nancy?" he asked politely.



"Lor, sir, how you did startle me to be sure. Sarah, look to lamb and put pastry to rise," cried Nancy, whisking off her apron, and darting out to the garden. "You see, sir, you and Miss Eve have took us by surprise, and it's as much as we shall do to have a bit of lunch ready for you at halfpast one."

"Never mind lunch, my good soul. A crust of bread and a morsel of cheese would be enough."

"Oh, it won't be quite so bad as that. Miss Eve likes my chiss-cakes, and she shall have a matrimony cake to her afternoon tea."

"Nancy, I want a little serious talk with you," Vansittart began gravely, when they had walked a little way from the house, and were standing side by side in front of the untidy patch where the vegetable marrows had swollen to great orange-coloured gourds. "I am full of fear about Miss Peggy."

"Oh, sir, so am I, so am I," cried Nancy, bursting into tears. "I didn't want to frighten dear Miss Eve—I beg pardon, sir, I never can think of her as Mrs. Vansittart."

"Never mind, Nancy. You were saying——"

"I didn't want to frighten your sweet young lady in the midst of her happiness; but when I saw that dear child beginning to go off just like her poor mother——"

"Oh, Nancy!" cried Vansittart, despairingly, with his hand on the Yorkshirewoman's arm. "Is that a sure thing? Did Mrs. Marchant die of consumption?"

"As sure as you and I are standing here, sir. It was a slow decline, but it was consumption, and nothing else. I've heard the doctors say so."

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## CHAPTER III.

“HE SAID, ‘SHE HAS A LOVELY FACE.’”

DECEMBER'S fogs covered London as with a funeral pall, and hansom and four-wheeler crept along the curb more slowly than a funeral procession. It was the winter season, the season of cattle-shows, and theatres, and middle-class suburban gaieties, and snug little dinners and luncheons in the smart world, casual meetings of birds of passage, halting for a few days between one country visit and another, or preparing for migration to sunnier skies. There were just people enough in May-fair to make London pleasant; and there were people enough in South Kensington and Tyburnia to fill the favourite theatres to overflowing.

A new comic opera had been produced at the Apollo at the beginning of the month, and a new singer had taken the town by storm.

The opera was called *Fanchonette*. It was a story of the Regency; the Regency of Philip of Orleans and his dissipated crew; the age of red heels and lansquenets, of little suppers and deadly duels; a period altogether picturesque, profligate, and adapted to comic opera.

Fanchonette was a girl who sang in the streets; a girl born in the gutter, vulgar, audacious, irresistible, and the good genius of the piece.

Fanchonette was Fiordelisa—and Fiordelisa in her own skin; good-natured, impetuous, a creature of smiles and tears; buoyant as a sea-gull on the crest of a summer wave; rejoicing in her strength and her beauty as the Sun rejoiceth to run his race.



What people most admired in this new songstress was her perfect *abandon*, and that abundant power of voice which seemed strong enough to have sustained the most exacting *rôle* in the classic repertoire, with as little effort as the light and graceful music of opera bouffe—the power of a Malibran or a Tietjens. The music of *Fanchonette* was florid, and the part had been written up for the new singer. Manager, artists, and author had thought Mr. Mervyn Hawberk, the composer, reckless almost to lunacy when he elected to entrust the leading part in his new opera to an untried singer; but Hawberk had made Signora Vivanti rehearse the music in his own music-room, not once, but many times, before he resolved upon this experiment; and having so resolved, he turned her over to Mr. Watling, the author of the libretto, to be coached in the acting of her part; and Mr. Watling was fain to confess that the young Venetian's vivacity and quickness of apprehension, the force and fire, the magnetism of her southern nature, made the work of dramatic education a very different thing to the weary labour of grinding his ideas into the bread and butter misses who were sometimes sent to him as aspirants for dramatic fame. This girl was so quick to learn and to perceive, and struggled so valiantly with the difficulties of a foreign language. And her Venetian accent, with its soft slurring of consonants, was so quaint and pretty. Mr. Watling took heart, and began to think that his friend and partner, Mervyn Hawberk, had some justification for his faith in this untried star.

The result fully justified Hawberk's confidence. There were two principal ladies in the opera—the patrician heroine, written for a light soprano, and the



gutter heroine, a mezzo soprano, whose music made a greater call upon the singer than the former character, which had been written especially for the Apollo's established prima donna, a lady with a charming bird-like voice, flexible and brilliant, but a little worn with six years' constant service, and a handsome face which was somewhat the worse for those six years in a London theatre. There could have been no greater contrast to Miss Emmeline Danby, with her sharp nose, blonde hair, sylph-like figure and canary-bird voice, than this daughter of St. Mark, whose splendour of colouring and fulness of form seemed in perfect harmony with the power and compass of her voice. The town, without being tired of Miss Danby, was at once caught and charmed by this new singer. Her blue-black hair and flashing eyes, her easy movements, her broken English, her gay girlish laughter, were all new to the audience of the Apollo, who hitherto had been called upon to applaud only the highest training of voice and person. Here was a girl who, like the character she represented, had evidently sprung from the proletariat, and who came dancing on to the London stage, fresh, fearless, unsophisticated, secure of the friendly feeling of her audience, and giving full scope to her natural gaiety of heart.

Signora Vivanti's personality was a new sensation, and to a *blasé* London public there is nothing so precious as a new sensation. Signor Zinco proved a true prophet. That touch of vulgarity which he had spoken of deprecatingly to Vansittart had made Lisa's fortune. Had she come straight from the Milan Conservatorio, cultivated to the highest pitch of artistic



training, approved by Verdi himself, she would hardly have succeeded as she had done, with all the rough edges of her grand voice unpolished, and all the little caprices and impertinences of a daughter of the people unchastened and unrestrained.

Lisa took the town by storm, and "Fanchonette," in her little mob cap and striped petticoat, appeared on half the match-boxes that were sold by the London tobacconists; and "Fanchonette," with every imaginable turn of head and shoulder, smiled in the windows of the Stereoscopic Company, and of all the fashionable stationers.

Among the many who admired the new singer, one of the most enthusiastic was Mr. Sefton, who generally spent a week or two of the early winter in his bachelor quarters at Chelsea, for the express purpose of seeing the new productions at the fashionable theatres, and of dining with his chosen friends.

Sefton was passionately fond of music, and knew more about it than is known to most country gentlemen. The loftiest classical school was not too high or too serious for him; and the lightest opera bouffe was not too low. He had a taste sufficiently catholic to range from Wagner to Offenbach. He was a profound believer in Sullivan, and he had a warm affection for Massenet.

*Fanchonette* was by far the cleverest opera which Mr. Hawberk had written; and Sefton was at the Apollo on the opening night, charmed with the music, and infinitely amused by the new singer. He went a second, a third, a fourth time during his fortnight in town; and the oftener he heard the music the better he liked it;



and the oftener he saw Signora Vivanti the more vividly was he impressed by her undisciplined graces of person and manner. She had just that spontaneity which had ever exercised the strongest influence over his mind and fancy. He had passed unmoved through the furnace of the best society, had danced and flirted, and had been on the best possible terms with some of the handsomest women in London, and had yet remained heartwhole. He had never been so near falling in love in all seriousness as with Eve Marchant; and Eve's chief charm had been her frank girlishness, her unsophisticated delight in life.

Well, he was cured of his passion for Eve, cured by that cold douche of indifference which the young lady had poured upon him; cured by the feeling of angry scorn which had been evoked by her preference for Vansittart; for a man who, in worldly position, in good looks, and in culture, Wilfred Sefton regarded as his inferior. He could not go on caring for a young woman who had shown herself so utterly deficient in taste as not to prefer the dubious advances of a Sefton to the honest love of a Vansittart. He dismissed Eve from his thoughts for the time being; but not without prophetic musings upon a day when she might be wearied of her commonplace husband, and more appreciative of Mr. Sefton's finer qualities of intellect and person. He was thus in a measure fancy free as he lolled in his stall at the Apollo, and listened approvingly to Lisa's full and bell-like tones in the quartette, which was already being played on all the barrel-organs in London, a quartette in which the composer had borrowed the dramatic form of the famous quartette in



*Rigoletto*, and adapted it to a serio-comic situation. He was free to admire this exuberant Italian beauty, free to pursue a divinity whom he judged an easy conquest. He and the composer were old friends—Hawberk being a familiar figure at all artistic gatherings in the artistic suburb of Chelsea—and from Hawberk Mr. Sefton had heard something of the new prima donna's history. He had been told that she was a daughter of the Venetian people, a lace-maker from one of the islands; that she had come to London with her aunt, to seek her fortune; and that her musical training had been accomplished within the space of a year, under the direction of Signor Zinco, the fat little Italian who played the 'cello at the Apollo.

Such a history did not suggest inaccessible beauty, and there was a touch of originality in it which awakened Sefton's interest. The very name of Venice has a touch of enchantment for some minds; and Sefton, although a man of the world, was not without romantic yearnings. He was always glad to escape from the beaten way of life.

He had been troubled and perplexed from the night of Signora Vivanti's *début* by the conviction that he had seen that brilliant face before, and by the inability to fix the when or the where. Yes, that vivid countenance was decidedly familiar. It was the individual and not the type which he knew—but where and when—where and when? The brain did its work in the usual unconscious way, and one night, sitting lazily in his stall, dreamily watching the scene, and the actress whose image seemed to fill the stage to the exclusion of all other figures, the memory of a past ren-



contre flashed suddenly upon the dreamer. The face was the face of the foreign girl he had seen on the Chelsea Embankment, hanging upon Vansittart's arm.

"By Heaven, there is something fatal in it," thought Sefton. "Are the threads always to cross in the web of our lives? He has worsted me with Eve; and now—now am I to fall deep in love with his cast-off mistress?"

He had been quick to make inferences from that little scene on the Embankment; the girl hanging on Vansittart's arm, looking up at him pleadingly, passionately. What could such a situation mean but a love affair of the most serious kind?

Had there been any doubt in Sefton's mind as to the nature of the intrigue Vansittart's evident embarrassment would have settled the question. Mr. Sefton was the kind of man who always thinks the worst about everybody, and prejudice had predisposed him to think badly of Eve's admirer.

This idea of the singer's probable relations with Vansittart produced a strong revulsion of feeling. Sefton told himself that his affection was too good to be wasted upon any man's cast-off mistress, least of all upon the leavings of a man he disliked. An element of scorn was now mixed with his admiration of the lovely Venetian. Until now he had approached her with deference, sending her a bouquet every evening, with his card, but making no other advance. But the day after his discovery he sent her a diamond bracelet, and asked with easy assurance to be allowed to call upon her.

The bracelet was returned to him, with a stately letter signed Zinco; a letter wherein the 'cello player



begged that his pupil might be spared the annoyance of gifts, which she could but consider as insults in disguise.

This refusal stimulated Sefton to renewed ardour. He forgot everything except the rebuff, which had taken him by surprise. He put the bracelet in a drawer of his writing-table, and turned the key upon it with a smile.

"She will be wiser by-and-by," he said to himself.

He went back to the country next day, and tried to forget Signora Vivanti's eyes, and the thrilling sweetness of her voice, tried to banish that seductive image altogether from his mind, while he devoted himself to the conquest of an untried hunter, a fine bay mare, whose pace was better than her manners, and who showed the vulgar strain in her pedigree very much as Signora Vivanti showed her peasant ancestry.

The season was not a good one, and in the face of a hard frost Sefton had nothing to do but brood upon the image that had taken possession of his fancy. It was only when he found himself amidst the tranquil surroundings of his country seat that he knew the strength of his infatuation for the singer.

He looked back upon his life as he strolled round the billiard table, cue in hand, trying a shot now and then yawningly, as the snow came softly down outside the Tudor windows, and gradually blotted out the view of garden and park. He looked back upon his life, wondering whether he had done the best for himself, starting from such an advantageous standpoint; whether, in his own careless phraseology, he had got change for his shilling.



He had always had plenty of money; he had always been his own master; he had always studied his own pleasure; and yet there had been burdens. His first love affair had turned out badly; so badly that there were people in Sussex who still gave him the cold shoulder on account of that old story. He had admired—nay, adored—a good many women since he left Eton; but he had never seen the woman for whom he cared to sacrifice his liberty, for whose sake he could bind himself for all his life to come. He knew himself well enough to know that all his passions were short-lived, and that, however deeply he might be in love to-day, satiety might come to-morrow.

He was ambitious, and he meant to marry a woman who could bring him increase of fortune and social status. He was not to be drifted into matrimony by the caprice of the hour. Much as he had admired Eve Marchant he had never thought of marrying her. A penniless girl with a disreputable father and a bevy of half-educated sisters was no mate for him. He had allowed himself full license in admiring her, and in letting her see that he admired her; and he had wondered that she should receive that open admiration as anything less than an honour.

And then a fool had stepped in to spoil sport—a besotted fool who took this girl for his wife, careless of her surroundings, defiant of Fate, which might overtake him in the shape of a blackguard brother. He felt only contempt for Vansittart when he thought over the story.

“He might have been content with his Venetian sweetheart,” he thought. “She is ever so much hand-



somer than Eve, and she obviously adored him; while that kind of ménage has the convenience of being easily got rid of when a man tires of it."

The snow lay deep on all the country round before nightfall, and Sefton went back to his nest in Chelsea on the following afternoon, and was in a stall at the Apollo in the evening. He tried to persuade himself that the music was the chief attraction.

"Your music is like a vice, Hawberk," he told the composer, at a tea-party next day. "It takes possession of a man's will. I go night after night to hear *Fanchonette*, though I know I am wasting my time."

"Thanks for the doubtful compliment. *Fanchonette* is a very pretty opera, quite the best thing I have done," replied Hawberk, easily; "and it is very well sung and acted. The singing is good all round, but Lisa Vivanti is a pearl."

"You are enthusiastic," said Sefton; and then smiling at the composer's young wife, who went everywhere with her husband, and whose province was to wear smart frocks and look pretty, "You must keep your eye upon him, Mrs. Hawberk, lest this Venetian siren should sing as fatal a song as the Lurlei."

"No fear," cried Hawberk. "Little Lisa is as straight as an arrow and as good as gold. She lives as quietly as a nun, with a comfortable dragon in the shape of an aunt. She would hardly look at a ripping diamond bracelet which some cad sent her the other day. She just tossed bracelet and letter over to her old singing-master, and told him to send it back to the giver. She has no greed of gain, no desire for carriages and horses and



fine raiment. She comes to the theatre in a shabby little black frock, and she lives like a peasant on a third floor in this neighbourhood."

"That will not last," said Sefton. "Your *rara avis* will soon realize her own value. The management will be called upon to provide her with a stable and a chef, and diamonds will be accepted freely as fitting tribute to her talents."

"I don't believe it. I think she is a genuine, honest, right-minded young woman, and that she will gang her own gait in spite of all counter influences. There may have been some love affair in the past that has sobered her. I think there has been; for there is a little boy who calls her mother, and for whom she takes no trouble to account. I will vouch for my little Lisa, and I have allowed Mrs. Hawberk to go and see her."

"She is quite too sweet," assented the lady; "so naive, so frank, so fresh, so child-like."

"Upon my honour," said Hawberk, as his wife fluttered away and was absorbed in a group of acquaintances, "I believe Vivanti is a good woman, in spite of the little peccadillo in a serge frock and sailor collar."

"I am very glad to hear it, for I want you to introduce me to the lady."

"Oh, but really now that is just what I don't care about doing. She is keeping herself to herself, and is working conscientiously at her musical education. She is a very busy woman, and she has no idea of society, or its ways and manners. What can she want with such an acquaintance as you?"



"Nothing; but I very much want to know her; and I pledge myself to approach her with all the respect due to the best woman in England."

"To approach her, yes; I can believe that. No doubt Lucifer approached Eve with all possible courtesy; yet the acquaintance ended badly. I don't see that any good could arise from your acquaintance with my charming Venetian."

"I understand," said Sefton, with an aggrieved air; "she is so charming that you would like to keep her all to yourself."

"Oh, come now, that's a very weak thing in the way of sneers," exclaimed the composer. "I hope I am secure from any insinuations of that sort. Look here, Sefton, I'm just a bit afraid of you; but if you promise to act on the square I'll get my wife to send you a card for a Sunday evening, at which I believe she is going to get Vivanti to sing for her. That is always the first thing Lavinia thinks of if I venture to introduce her to a singer."

"That would be very friendly of you, and I promise to act on the square. I am not a married man, and I am my own master. If I were desparately in love——"

"You wouldn't marry a Venetian lace-maker, with a damaged reputation. I know you too well to believe you capable of that sort of thing."

"Nobody knows of what a man is capable; least of all the man himself," said Sefton, sententiously.

Mr. and Mrs. Hawberk lived in a smart little house in that dainty and artistic region of Cheyne Walk, which even yet retains a faint flavour of Don Saltero, of Boling-



broke and Walpole, of Chelsea buns and Chelsea china, Ranelagh routs, and Thames watermen. Mr. Hawberk's house was in a terrace at right angles with the Embankment, but further west than Tite Street. It was a new house, with all the latest improvements, and all the latest fads, tiny panes to Queen Anne windows—admitting the minimum of light and not overmuch air; a spacious ingle nook in a miniature dining-room, whereby facetious friends had frequently been heard to ask Mrs. Hawberk which was the ingle nook and which was the dining-room.

The house was quaint and pretty, and being entirely furnished with Japaneseries was a very fascinating toy, if not altogether the most commodious thing in the way of houses. For party-giving it was delightful, for less than a hundred people choked every inch of space in rooms and staircase, and suggested a tremendous reception: so that the smallest of Mrs. Hawberk's parties seemed a crush.

Sefton arriving at half-past ten, only half an hour after the time on Mrs. Hawberk's card, found the drawing-rooms blocked with people, mostly standing, and could see no more of Signora Vivanti than if she had been on the other side of the river; but the people in the doorway were talking about her, and their talk informed him that she was somewhere in the innermost angle of the back drawing-room, behind the grand piano, and that she was going to sing.

Then there came an authoritative "Silence, please," from Hawberk, followed by a sudden hush as of sentences broken off in the middle, and anon a firm hand played the symphony to Sullivan's *Orpheus*, and the grand



mezzo soprano voice rolled out the grand Shakespearean words set to exquisite music. The choice of the song was a delicate compliment to Hawberk's master in art, who was among Mrs. Hawberk's guests.

The Venetian accent was still present in Lisa's pronunciation, but her English had improved as much as her vocalization, under Hawberk's training. He had taken extraordinary pains with this particular song, and every note rang out clear as crystal, pure as thrice-refined gold. Sir Arthur's "Brava, bravissima!" was heard amidst the applause that followed the song.

Sefton elbowed his way through the crowd—as politely as was consistent with a determination to reach a given point—and contrived to mingle with the group about the singer. She was standing by the piano in a careless attitude, dressed in a black velvet gown, which set off the yellowish whiteness of her shoulders and full round throat. Clasped round that statuesque throat, she wore a collet necklace of diamonds, splendid in size and colour, a necklace which could not have been bought for less than six or seven hundred pounds.

"So," thought Sefton. "Those diamonds don't quite come into Hawberk's notion of the lady's moral character."

Mr. Sefton did not know that, after the manner of Venetian women, Lisa looked upon jewellery as the best investment for her capital, and that almost the whole of her professional earnings since her *début* were represented by the diamonds she wore round her neck. She and la Zia were able to live on so little, and it was such a pleasure to them to save, first to gloat over the golden sovereigns, and then to change them into precious



stones. There was such a delightful feeling in being able to wear one's fortune round one's neck.

Mr. Hawberk had accompanied the singer, and he was still sitting at the piano, when Sefton's eager face reminded him of his promise.

"Signora, allow me to introduce another of your English admirers. Mr. Sefton, a connoisseur in the way of music, and a cosmopolitan in the way of speech."

Lisa turned smilingly to the stranger. "You speak Italian," she said in her own language, and Sefton replying in very good Tuscan, they were soon on easy terms; and presently he had the delight of taking her down to the supper-room, where there was a long narrow table loaded with delicacies, and a perpetual flow of champagne.

Lisa enjoyed herself here as frankly as she had enjoyed herself at the sign of the Black Hat, in the Piazza di San Marco. She was the same unsophisticated Lisa still, in the matter of quails and lobster mayonnaise, creams and jellies. She stood at the table and eat all the good things that Sefton brought her, and drank three or four glasses of champagne with jovial unconcern, and talked of the people and the gowns they were wearing in her soft southern tongue, secure of not being understood, though Sefton warned her occasionally that there might be other people in the room besides themselves who knew the language of Dante and Boccaccio.

Never had he talked to any beautiful woman who was so thoroughly unsophisticated; and that somewhat plebeian nature had a curious charm for him. He could understand Vansittart's infatuation for such a woman, but could not understand his giving her up for the sake



of Eve Marchant, whose charms as compared with Lisa's were

"As moonlight unto sunlight, or as water unto wine."

He hoped to discover all the history of that intrigue by-and-by, seeing how freely Lisa talked of herself to an acquaintance of an hour. He meant to follow up that acquaintance with all the earnestness of which he was capable.

"There are no finer diamonds in the room than your necklace," he said, when she had been praising an ancient dowager's jewels, gems whose beauty was not enhanced by a neck that looked as if its bony structure had been covered with one of the family parchments.

"Do you really like them?" asked Lisa, with a flashing smile.

"She doesn't even blush for her spoil," thought Sefton.

"I'm so glad you think them good," continued Lisa. "They are all my fortune. The jeweller told me I should never repent buying them."

"What, Signora, did you buy them? I thought they were the offering of some devoted admirer."

"Do you suppose I would accept such a gift from any one except—except somebody I cared for?" she exclaimed indignantly. "A man sent me a diamond bracelet one night at the theatre—I found it in my dressing-room when I arrived—with his card. I sent it back next morning—or at least Zinco sent it back for me."

"And I dare say you have even forgotten the man's name?" said Sefton.



"Yes. Your English names are very ugly, and very difficult to remember. They are so short; so insignificant."

And then she told him the history of her diamonds; how the manager of the Apollo had first doubled, and then trebled, and then quadrupled her salary; how she had kept the money in her trunk, all in gold, sovereigns upon sovereigns, and how she and her aunt had counted the gold every week, and how only last Saturday she and la Zia had gone off in a cab to Piccadilly, with a bag full of gold, and had bought the diamonds, which were now shining on Fiordelisa's throat.

"We had less than half the price of the necklace," concluded Lisa, "but when the jeweller heard who I was, he insisted that I should take it away with me, and pay him by degrees, just as I find convenient, so I shall pay him my salary every Saturday until I am out of debt."

"It sounds like a fairy tale," said Sefton. "Do you and your aunt live upon rose leaves and dew, Signora; or how is that you can afford to invest all your earnings in diamonds?"

"Oh, we have other money," answered Lisa, with a defiant glance at the questioner. "I need not sing unless I like."

"Indeed!" exclaimed Sefton, strengthened in his conviction that Signora Vivanti was not altogether so "straight" as Hawberk believed, or affected to believe.

Mr. Sefton was not so confiding as the composer. He was a man prone to think badly of women, and he was inclined to think the worst of this brilliant Venetian, much as he admired her. He followed her like a



shadow for the rest of the evening, escorted her up the narrow staircase, and stood near the piano while she sang, and then took her from the stifling atmosphere of the lamp-lit house to the semi-darkness of the garden, which Mrs. Hawberk had converted into a tent, shutting out the wintry sky, and enclosing the miniature lawn and surrounding shrubbery; a tent dimly lighted with fairy lamps, nestling among the foliage. Here he sat talking with Lisa in a shadowy corner, while three or four other couples murmured and whispered in other nooks and corners, and while Hawberk, feeling he had done his duty as host, smoked and drank whisky and soda with a little group of chosen friends—an actor, a journalist, a playwright, and a brace of musical critics, who had an inexhaustible flow of speech, and a delicious unconsciousness of time.

Sefton too was unconscious of time, talking with Lisa in that soft Italian tongue, having to bend his head very near the full red lips in order to catch the Venetian elisions, the gentle, sliding syllables.

The hum of voices, the occasional ripples of laughter, the music and song, dwindled and died into silence—even the lights in the lower windows grew dim, and gradually Sefton awakened to the fact that the party was at an end, and that he and Signora Vivanti, and Hawberk's Bohemian group yonder, were all that remained of Mrs. Hawberk's musical evening. He bent down to look at his watch by one of the fairy lamps.

Three o'clock.

"By Jove, we are sitting out everybody else," he said, with a pleased laugh, triumphant at the thought that he had been able to amuse and interest his com-



panion. "Three o'clock. Very late for a musical evening. You did not know it was so late, did you, Signora?"

"No," answered Lisa, carelessly; "but I don't mind. I've been enjoying myself."

"So have I; but it's rather rough on Mrs. Hawberk, who may want to rest from her labours."

"I am quite ready to go home as soon as I get my shawl," said Lisa, rising from the low wicker chair, straight as a dart, her neck and shoulders and long bare arms looking like marble in the faint glimmer of the toy lamps. Sefton stood and looked at her, drinking in her loveliness as if it had been a draught of wine from an enchanted cup. Oh, the charm of those Italian eyes; so brilliant, yet so soft; so darkly deep! Could there be any magic in fairyland more potent than the spell this Calypso was weaving round him?

"May I call your carriage?" he asked.

"I have no carriage. I live close by."

"Let me see you home, then."

She shrugged her shoulders with a gesture which meant that the thing wasn't worth disputing about, and Sefton followed her across the little bit of grass to the house door. Hawberk stopped her on her way.

"What, my Vivanti not gone yet!" he cried. "I would have had another song out of you if I had known you were there. What have you and Mr. Sefton found to say to each other all this time?"

"We have found plenty to say. He has been talking Italian, which none of you stupid others can talk. It is a treat to hear my own language from some one besides la Zia. Good night, Signor. Shall I find la Signora to wish her good night?"



"No, child. La Signora Hawberkini retired to rest an hour ago, when all the respectable people had gone. She did not wait to see the last of such night birds as you and Sefton, and these disreputable journalists here."

"I love the night," said Lisa, in no wise abashed. "It is ever so much nicer than day."

The servants had vanished, but she found her wrap lying on a sofa—an old red silk shawl, a Bellagio shawl, whose dinginess went ill with her velvet gown and diamond necklace; but she wrapped it about her head and shoulders, nothing caring, and she looked a real Italian peasant as she turned to Sefton in the light of the hall lamps. He admired her even more at this moment than he had admired her before—he liked to think of her as a peasant; with no womanly sensitiveness to suffer, no pride to be wounded; divided from him socially by a great gulf of difference; and so much the more surely, and so much the more lightly to be won.

They went out into the street together. It was moonlight, a February moon, cold, and sharp, and clear, with a hoar-frost whitening the wintry shrubs and iron railings. Lisa caught up her velvet train, and tripped lightly along the pavement in bronze beaded slippers and bright red stockings, Sefton at her side. She would not take his arm, both hands being occupied, one clutching the silk shawl, the other holding up her skirt. The walk was of the shortest, for Saltero's Mansion was only just round the corner; nor could Sefton detain her on the doorstep for any sentimentality about the moonlit river. She had her key in the door in a moment, and



as he pushed the big, heavy door open for her, she vanished behind it with briefest "Grazie, e buona notte, caro Signor."

There had not been time for the gentlest pressure of her strong, broad hand, or for his tender "Addio, bellissima mia," to be heard.

But to know where she lived was something gained, and as he walked homeward humming "*la donna è mobile*," he meant to follow up that advantage. He had told her that he was her near neighbour. He had gone even further, and had asked her if she would sing for him at a little tea-party, were he to give one in her honour; on which she had only laughed, and said that she had never heard of a man giving a tea-party.

The acquaintance begun so auspiciously gave Wilfred Sefton a new zest for London life. He hailed the hardening frosts of February with absolute pleasure, he for whom that month had hitherto been the cream of the hunting season. He cared nothing that his latest acquisitions; the hunters in whose perfections he still believed, whose vices he had not had time to discover, were eating their heads off in his Sussex stables. He was in his stall at the Apollo every night; and Lisa's singing and Lisa's beauty, and the "quips and cranks and wanton wiles" which constituted Lisa's idea of acting, were enough for his contentment.

He waited till Wednesday before he ventured to call upon his divinity. He would gladly have presented himself at her door on Monday afternoon; but he did not want to appear too eager. Tuesday seemed a long blank day to his impatience, although there was plenty to do in London for a man of intellect and taste;



pictures, people, politics, all manner of interests and amusements.

Lisa had told him about the aunt who lived with her and kept house for her. There could be no shadow of impropriety in his visit. He made up his mind indeed to ask for the elder lady in the first instance; but all uncertainty was saved him, as it was la Zia who opened the door. Those diamonds of Lisa's could not have been earned so speedily had the Venetians taken upon themselves the maintenance of a servant. What was she there for, argued la Zia, when Hawberk suggested the necessity of a parlour-maid, except to sweep and dust, and market and cook? An English servant, who would want butcher's meat every day, and would object to the cuisine *à l'huile*, would be an altogether ruinous institution.

La Zia was not too tidy in her indoor apparel, since her love for finery was stronger than her sense of the fitness of things. She had one gown at a time, a gown of silk or plush or velveteen, which she wore as a best gown till it began to be shabby or dilapidated, when Lisa bought her another fine gown, and the old one was taken for daily use.

Lisa's taste had become somewhat chastened since she had lived at Chelsea. A casual word or two from Vansittart, whose lightest speech she remembered, had made her scrupulously plain in her attire—save on such an occasion as Mrs. Hawberk's party, when her innate love of finery showed itself in scarlet stockings and beaded shoes. This afternoon Sefton found her sitting on the hearthrug in front of the bright little tiled grate, in the black stuff gown she had worn when he first saw



her, and with just the same touch of colour at her throat, and in her blue-black hair.

She and the little boy were sitting on the rug together, dividing the caprices of a white kitten, the plaything of mother and son, mother and son laughing gaily, with laughter which mingled and harmonized in perfect music. The boy made no change in his sprawling attitude as Sefton entered; but he looked up at the stranger with large dark eyes, wondering, and slightly resentful.

"*His* boy," thought Sefton, and felt a malignant disposition to kick the sprawling imp, hanging on to the mother's skirts, and preventing her from rising to greet her visitor.

"Let go, Paolo," said Lisa, laughing. "What with you and the kitten, I can't stir."

She shook herself free, transferred the kitten to the boy's eager arms, rose, and gave Sefton her hand, with a careless grace which was charming to contemplate from an artistic point of view, but which showed him how faint an impression all their talk and intimacy of Sunday night had made upon her. A woman who had thought of him in the interval would have blushed and been startled at his coming. Lisa took his visit much too easily. There was neither surprise nor gladness in her greeting.

"I saw you in the stalls," she said, "last night, and the night before. Aren't you tired of *Fanchonette*?"

"Not in the least."

"You must be monstrously fond of music," she said, always in Italian.

"I am—monstrously; but I have other reasons for



liking *Fanchonette*. I like to see you act, as well as hear you sing."

"So do other people," she answered, with frank vanity, tossing up her head. "They all applaud me when I first come on, before I have sung a note. I have to stand there in front of the lights for ever so long, while they go on applauding like mad. And yet people say you English have no enthusiasm, that you care very little for anything."

"We care a great deal for that which is really beautiful; but most of all when it is fresh and new."

"Ah! that's what Mr. Hawberk says—I am all the better because I am not highly trained like other singers. My ignorance is my strength."

"But she has worked," interposed la Zia; "ah! how hard she has worked! At her piano; at the English language. She has such a strong will. She has but to make up her mind, and the thing is done."

"One can read as much, Signora, in those flashing eyes; in that square brow and firmly moulded chin," said Sefton, putting down his hat and cane, and establishing himself in one of the prettily draped basket-chairs. "And pray how did it happen that you two ladies made up your minds to seek your fortunes in London?"

"It was the impresario who brought us. We were at Milan, and we came to London to sing in the chorus at Covent Garden. It was good fortune which brought us so far from home."

"And you hate London, no doubt, after Italy?"

"No, indeed, Signor. London is a city to love—the wide, wide streets; the big, big houses; the great squares—



ah! the Piazza is nothing to your squares—and the shops, the beautiful shops! Your sky is often gloomy, but there are summer days—heavenly days—when the wind blows down to the sea, and sweeps all the darkness out of the heavens, and your sky grows blue, like Italy. Those are days to remember.”

“True! They are rare enough to be counted on the fingers of one hand,” answered Sefton, stooping to take hold of the boy, who had been pursuing his kitten on all-fours, and had this moment plunged between Sefton’s legs to extract the animated ball of white fluff from under his chair. He felt nothing but aversion for the handsome, dark-eyed brat; but he felt that he must take some notice of the creature, if he wanted to stand well with the mother.

“Che sta facendo, padroncino?”

The boy was friendly, and explained himself in a torrent of broken speech. The cat was a bad cat, and wouldn’t stay with him. Would the Signor make him stay? Sefton had to stoop and risk a scratching from the tiny claws, in a vain endeavour to get hold of the rebellious beast, which rolled away from him, hissing and spitting, and finally rushed across the room and took refuge behind the piano. Sefton lifted the boy on to his knee, and produced his watch, that unfailing object of interest to infancy, usually denominated, on the principle of all slang nomenclature, “tick-tick.” Once interested in the opening and shutting of the “tick-tick,” Paolo sat on the visitor’s knee, *comme une image*, and allowed Sefton to talk to Lisa and her aunt.

He was careful to make himself agreeable to the elder lady, who was charmed to find an Englishman



who understood her native tongue. She had contrived to learn a little English, but had made no such progress as her niece, and it was a labour to her to talk. What a pleasure, therefore, to find this suave, handsome Englishman, with his courtly manners, quick comprehension, and ready replies.

From la Zia he heard a good deal about Lisa's early life; yet there was a certain wise reticence even on that loquacious lady's part. She breathed no word of Lisa's Englishman, the first Mr. Smith, or of the second. In all her talk of their old life, in Venice, at Milan, there was no hint of any one but themselves. They appeared to have been alone, unprotected, dependent on their own small earnings.

After waiting in vain for any allusion to Vansittart, Mr. Sefton came straight to the point, with a direct question.

"I think you know a friend of mine, Signora," he said to Lisa. "Mr. Vansittart?"

"Vansittart?"

Lisa repeated the name slowly, with a look of blank wonder.

"Have you never heard that name before?"

"Never."

"So," thought Sefton, "she knew him under an alias. That means a good deal, and confirms my original idea."

He put the boy off his knee almost roughly, and rose to take his leave.

"Good-bye, Signora. You will let me drop in again some day, I hope?"

"If you like. Why did you think I knew your friend, Mr. Van—sit—tart?"



"Because last spring I saw you in Cheyne Walk talking to a man whom I took for Vansittart. A tall man, with fair hair. You seemed very friendly with him; your hands were clasped upon his arm; you were smiling up at him."

This time Lisa blushed a deep carnation, and her face saddened.

"Oh, that," she stammered—"that was some one I knew in Italy."

"Not Vansittart?"

"No."

"But the gentleman has a name of some kind," persisted Sefton.

"Never mind his name," she answered abruptly. "I don't want to talk about him. I may never see him again, perhaps." And then, brushing away a tear, and becoming suddenly frivolous, she asked, "How did you come to remember me—after so long?"

"Because that moment by the river yonder has lived in my memory ever since—because no man can forget the loveliest face he ever saw in his life."

With that compliment, and with a lingering clasp of the strong hand, he concluded his first visit to Saltero's Mansion, la Zia accompanying him to the door and curtsying him out.

## CHAPTER IV.

### PEGGY'S CHANCE.

IF there were blue skies now and then in a London February, what was February along the Riviera, but the most exquisite spring-time? And perhaps on all that



favoured shore, Cannes has the richest first-fruits of the fertile year, for it is then that the mimosas are in their glory, and the hill of Californie is a kind of yellow fairyland, an enchanted region, where all the trees drop golden rain.

Eve and her lover husband were at Cannes. Delicious as the place was at this season, and new as the shores of the Mediterranean were to Eve, she and her husband had not come there for their own pleasure. They had come at the advice of the doctors—to give Peggy a chance. That was what it had come to, Peggy's only chance of living through the winter was to be found in the south. One doctor had suggested Capri, another Sorrento; but for some unexplained reason Vansittart objected to Italy, and then Mentone or Cannes had been talked about; and finally Cannes was decided upon, for medical reasons, in order that Peggy might have the watchful care of Dr. Bright, which might give her an additional chance in the hand-to-hand struggle with her grim adversary.

Vansittart had offered, in the first instance, to send Peggy to the south in the care of one of her elder sisters and an experienced travelling-maid, to be chosen especially for the invalid's comfort; but Eve had been so distressed at the idea of parting with the ailing child, so fearful lest she should not be properly nursed, or lest she should droop and die of home-sickness, that of his own accord he had offered to accompany this youngest sister-in-law on the journey, that was to give her a chance—alas! only a chance. None of the doctors talked of cure as a certainty. Peggy's family history was bad; and Peggy's lungs were seriously affected.



It was almost inevitable that the youngest child—born after the mother's health had begun to fail—should inherit the mother's fatal tendency to lung disease; but things were altogether different in the case of Eve, the eldest daughter, born before her mother had begun to develop lung trouble. For Eve there was every chance. This was what a distinguished specialist told Vansittart, when he asked piteously if the hereditary disease shown too clearly by Peggy, were likely to appear by-and-by in Eve's constitution. He was obliged to take what comfort he could from this assurance. He would not alarm Eve by suggesting that her chest should be sounded by the physician who had just passed sentence upon her sister. Perhaps he did not want to learn too much. He was content to see his young wife fair and blooming, with all the indications of perfect health, and to believe that she must needs be exempt from inherited evil.

She was enraptured when he offered to take her to the south with Peggy.

"You are more than good, you are adorable," she cried. "Now I feel justified in having worshipped you. What, you will leave Hampshire just when the hunting is at its best? You will forego all your plans for the spring? And you will put up with a sick child's company?"

"I shall have my wife's company, and that is enough. I shall see you happy and at ease, and not wearing yourself to death with anxieties and apprehensions about Peggy."

"Yes, I shall be ever so much happier with her, should things come to the worst"—her eyes brimmed



over with sudden tears at the thought—"it will be so much to be with her—to know that we have made her quite happy."

They went to Haslemere next morning, and there was a grand scene with Peggy, who screamed with rapture on hearing that Eve and Jack were going to take her to Cannes their very own selves. She, who fancied she had lost Eve for ever, was to live with her, to sleep in the next room to her, to see her every day and all day long.

Then came the journey—the long, long journey, which made Eve and Peggy open wondering eyes at the width of France from sea to sea. They travelled with all those luxuries which modern civilization provides for the traveller who is willing to pay for them. And every detail of the journey was a new surprise and a new joy for Peggy, who brought upon herself more than one bad fit of coughing by her absolute ecstasy. The luncheon and dinner on board the rushing *Rapide*; the comfortable *wagon-lit* to retire to at Lyons, when darkness had fallen over the eternal monotony of the landscape—and anon the surprise of awaking at midnight in a large bright room where two small beds were veiled like brides in white net curtains, and where a delightful wood fire blazed on a wide open hearth, such as Peggy only knew of in fairy tales.

How comforting was the basin of hot soup which Peggy sipped, squatting beside this cavernous chimney, while Benson, the courier-maid, skilled in nursing invalids, who had been engaged chiefly to wait upon Peggy, unpacked the Gladstone bag, and made everything comfortable for the night. Peggy had slept fitfully all the



way from Lyons, hearing as in a dream the porters shouting "Avignon," at a place where they stopped in the winter darkness, and faintly remembering having heard of a city where Popes lived and tortured people once upon a time. She woke now and again in her white-curtained bed at Marseilles; for however happy her days might be her nights were generally restless and troubled. The new maid was very attentive to her, and gave her lemonade when her throat was parched, but the maid was able to sleep soundly between whiles, when Peggy was lying awake gazing through the white net curtains, and half expecting Robin Goodfellow to come creeping out of the wide black chimney, where the last red glow had faded from the heap of pale grey ashes on the hearth.

Towards morning Peggy fell into a refreshing slumber, and when she opened her eyes again the room was full of sunshine, and there was a band playing the "Faust Waltz" in the public gardens below.

"Why, it's summer!" cried Peggy, clapping her hands, and leaping out of the parted white curtains, and rushing to the open window.

The maid was dressed, and Peggy's breakfast was ready for her. "Oh, such delicious coffee!" she told Eve afterwards, "in a sweet little copper pot, and rolls such as were never made in humdrum England."

Yes, it was summer, the February summer of that lovely shore. The Vansittarts stayed nearly a week at Marseilles, to rest Peggy after her forty-eight hours' journey; and to see the Votive Church on the hill, and that famous dungeon on the rock which owes more of its renown to fiction than to fact; and the parting of the ways where the ships sail east and west, to Orient or



Afric, the two wonder-worlds for the untravelled European. Eve and Peggy looked longingly at the great steamers vanishing on the horizon, hardly knowing whether, if the choice were put to them, they would go right or left—to the country where the Great Moguls, the jewelled temples, the tiger hunts, the palanquins, the tame elephants with castles on their backs are to be found; or to the country where the Moors live, and where modern civilization camps gipsy-fashion among the vestiges of earth's most ancient people.

"Where would you like to go best, India or Africa?" asked Eve, as she and Peggy sat side by side in a fairy-like yawl, that went dipping and dancing over those summer waves, and seemed like a toy boat as it sailed under the lee of an Orient steamer bound for Alexandria.

"Oh, I think I would rather go up a pyramid than anything," gasped Peggy, breathless at the mere thought. "Don't you remember 'Belzoni's Travels,' that tattered little old book which once was mother's, and how they used to grope about, Belzoni and his people, and lose themselves in dark passages, and make discoveries inside the Pyramids? And then the Nile, and the crocodiles, which one could always run away from, because they can't turn, don't you know? Oh, I think Egypt must be best of all."

Peggy and her companions were out driving along the Corniche road or sailing over the blue waters every day, and all day long; and the invalid made a most wonderful recovery during that week.

Her nights were ever so much quieter, her appetite had improved. Peggy's chance began to look like a certainty, and hope revived in Eve's breast. Hope had never



died there. She could not believe that this bright, happy young creature was to be taken away from her. There was such vitality in Peggy, such vigour in those thin arms when they clasped themselves round Eve's neck, such light and life in the full blue eyes when they looked out upon the movement and variety of the Rue Cannebière, or the bustle of the quays.

They went on to Cannes, and alighted first at one of the most comfortable hotels in Europe, the Mont Fleuri, so as to take their time in the selection of a home; for they meant to stay in Provence till there was an end of cold weather in England, to go back only when an English spring should have done its worst, and the footsteps of summer should be at hand. If Cannes should grow too warm, there was Grasse; and there were cool retreats perched still higher on the mountain slopes, where they might spend the last month or so of their sojourn. There were reasons why Eve would be glad to escape from the little world in which she was known, reasons why she should prefer the absolute retirement of a villa in a strange land, where she need receive no more visitors than she chose, where she might let it be known among the little community of British residents that she did not desire to be called upon.

They found just the retreat that suited them, high on the fair hill, which at this season was cloaked with the mimosa's golden bloom as with a royal garment. The villa stood on higher ground than the Hôtel Californie, and all the gulf of San Juan lay at its feet, and the ships at anchor looked like toy ships in the distance of that steep descent, where palm and pine, cypress and olive, lent their varying form and colour to



the rough grey rocks, and where garden below garden spread a carpet of vivid flowers, hedges of roses, beds of pale pink and deep purple anemones, the scarlet and orange of the ranunculus, amidst the gloom of rocky gorge and pine forest.

Beyond the gulf rose the islands, shadowy at eventide, clear and sunlit in those early mornings when Peggy watched the red fires of dawn lighting up far away yonder towards Italy. She shared Eve's vivid imaginings about that neighbouring country, and thought with wonder of being so near the border of that mystical land. All her ideas of Italy were derived from "Childe Harold," the more famous passages of which she had read and learnt diligently under Eve's instruction, the eldest daughter carrying on the education of the youngest in a casual way, after the homely governess had vanished from the scene.

The villa was a small house, flung down carelessly, as it seemed, in a spacious garden, a garden which had been neglected of late years, since much smarter villas had risen up, white and ornamental, upon the heights of Californie. But the garden had once been cared for. It was full of roses and ivy-leaved geranium, anemones and narcissi, and, what pleased Peggy most of all, there was a grove of orange trees, where she could lie upon the grass and let the mandarin oranges drop into her lap. Eve and her young sister sat in this orange orchard for hours at a stretch, Eve working at one of those tiny garments which it was her delight to make—"dressing dolls," Vansittart called it; Peggy pretending to read, but for the most part gazing at sky or sea, watching the white clouds or the white ships sailing by in the blue.



"Don't you think heaven must be very like this?" Peggy asked, one sunshiny noontide, when the sky was of its deepest sapphire, and the balmy air had the warmth and perfume of an English midsummer.

"What, Peg, do you suppose there are orange trees in the 'Land of the Leal'—orange trees, and smart villas, and afternoon parties?"

"No, no—only the blue sky, and the sea, and the hills jutting out, one beyond another, till they melt into the sky. It looks as if one could never come to the end of it all. It looks just like heaven."

"Endless, and without limits, like Eternity," said Vansittart, smiling at her, unconscious that Eve's head was bent lower and lower over her work to hide the streaming tears. "A pretty fancy. But that boundless-seeming sea is only a big round pool after all; and think how clever it was of Columbus to find his way out of that mill-pond, and across the great ocean, and what triumph for Cortez to discover a second ocean, bigger than the first. And yet this earth of ours is only a round ball, a speck in the infinite."

"Don't," cried Peggy, with her fingers in her ears. "You make my head ache. I can't bear to think of the universe; it's too big. Mütterchen used to tell me about it when I was a small child. She made me dream bad dreams. Why isn't there one nice, comfortable world for us to live in, and one lovely heaven for us to go to after we are dead, and one horrid hell for the *very* bad people, just to prevent their mixing with the good ones? That's what the Bible means, doesn't it? I can't bear to think of anything more than that."

"Don't think, darling," said Eve, sitting down on



the grass beside her, and drawing the fragile form close against her own—"don't think. Only be happy. Breathe this delicious air, bask in this delightful sun, be happy and get well."

"Oh, I am getting well as fast as ever I can. Except for my tiresome cough, I am as well as anybody can be. I wonder what they are doing at Fernhurst. Skating on Farmer Green's pond, perhaps, or crouching over the fire. You know how Hetty would always sit with her head hanging over the coals, in spite of all you could say about spoiling her complexion. And here we spoil our complexions in the sun. Isn't it wonderful?"

"Everything in our lives is wonderful, Peggy. Most of all, that I should have such a husband as Jack."

Eve held out her hand to that model husband, smiling at him, with eyes that were veiled in tears, more grateful for his goodness to this ailing child than for all the love that he had lavished upon herself.

What a happy season this would have been in the lovely land beside the tideless sea, if hope had never been dashed with fear. But, alas! there were moments, even at Peggy's best, when the shadow of earthly doom fell dark across the summer glory of a clime that knows not winter. Sometimes, in the midst of her joyous delight in the things around her, a sudden paroxysm of coughing would surprise the poor child, shaking and rending her as if some invisible demon had seized the wasted form by the narrow shoulders, and were trying to tear it piecemeal.

"My enemy has been very cruel to me to-day," Peggy would say afterwards, with a serio-comic smile. "I thought Dr. Bright would get the better of him."



At first she used to call that wearing cough her enemy, as she had heard old people talk of their gout or their rheumatism. Later, she talked of her cough as the dragon, and of Dr. Bright as St. George; but although the medical champion might get the better of the dragon now and again, he was a sturdy monster, and harder to kill than the toughest crocodile along the sandy shores of old Nile. Peggy was wonderfully hopeful about herself, even when hope began to wax faint and dim in the heart of her companions, when the trained attendant could tell of sleepless and sorely-troubled nights, and when Eve, creeping in from her adjoining bed-chamber half a dozen times between night and morning, was saddened at finding the fevered head tossing unquietly upon the heaped-up pillows, the blue eyes wide open, and the parched lips uttering speech that told of semi-delirium.

However bad Peggy's nights were, her days were generally cheerful. She was never tired of the hillside walks, the luxury of ferns, and palms, and aloes, the glory of the golden-tufted mimosas, the peach blossoms, the anemones, the silvery threads of water creeping down the rocky gorges—such narrow streamlets, cleaving Titanic rocks. To Peggy these things brought no satiety; while the more earthly and sensual enjoyment of afternoon tea at Rumpelmeyer's, sitting out of doors, and eating as many cakes and bonbons as ever she liked, was only a lesser revelation of a world where all was beauty. Eve and her husband saw the crowds at Rumpelmeyer's with an amused interest. They looked on at this curiously blended smart world, this olla-podrida of Royal Duchesses and Liverpool merchants, millionaires



and impecunious *cavalieri serventi*, Parisian celebrities, the old nobility of France and England—old as the Angevin kings when England and France were one monarchy—and the newly gotten wealth of New York and Chicago. Eve and Vansittart looked on and were amused, and then drove back to the villa on the hill, and rejoiced in the seclusion of their own garden, which it had been their delight to improve and beautify. Everything grew so quickly—the rose-trees they planted throve so well that it was like gardening in fairyland.

They were not intruded upon by that smart world which they saw at the tea-shop on the Croisette. At Cannes two things only count as worthy of regard or reverence—the first, fashion; the second, money. Eve and her husband had neither one nor the other. A Hampshire squire, with three thousand a year and a young wife, was a person who could interest nobody. Had he been a bachelor and a dancing man, he would have been eligible and even courted; for dancing men are in a minority, and a ball at the Cercle Nautique is apt to recall Edwin Long's famous picture of the Babylonian Marriage Market, women of all nationalities waiting to be asked to dance. A married man, a Hampshire squire, living quietly with his wife and her sister in one of the cheapest villas in Californie, was a person to seek, and not to be sought. If the Vansittarts wanted to be in society they should have brought letters of introduction, observed a Plutocrat whose garden joined the Vansittarts' modest enclosure. "We can't be expected to take any interest in people of whom we know absolutely nothing."

It would have been difficult, if not impossible, for



the leaders of Cannes society, the owners of palatial villas, and givers of luncheons and dances, to believe or understand that these pariahs did not desire to enter within the charmed circle where wealth was the chief qualification, and where the triple millionaire, however humble his origin, and however dubious the source of his gold, was sure of admission and approval. Granted that such millionaires were talked of lightly as "good fun." The smart people who laughed were pleased to eat their luncheons, and dance at their balls, or drive on their coaches, or sail in their yachts. For the smart world of Californie and La Route de Fréjus February meant a continual round of luncheons and teas, dinners and dances. Everybody complained of the "strain," of being "dragged" from party to party, of having "so much to do;" these butterflies treating the futilities of life as if they were serious labour. To these the tranquil happiness of such a couple as Eve and Vansittart was unthinkable. Of course the poor things would be in society if society would have them. Cannes must be very dreary for such as they. It was really a pity that this kind of people did not stop short at St. Raphael or go on to Alassio.

While society—looking at the "pretty young woman with the rather handsome husband" from afar, through a tortoiseshell *merveilleuse*—compassionated their forlorn condition, Eve and Vansittart found the resources of the neighbourhood inexhaustible, had schemes and delights for every day, and Peggy was never tired of comparing the Maritime Alps to heaven. What less in loveliness than heaven could be a land where one could picnic in February? For Peggy's sake there were many



picnics—now in a rocky gorge on the road to Vallauris, where one could sit about the dry bed of a cataract, and set out one's luncheon on great rocky boulders, screened by feathery palm trees that suggested the South Sea Islands; now on the hilltop at Mougins, with the great white hotel, and the pinnacled walls of Grasse looking at them, across the deep valley of flower fields and mulberry orchards, blossoming lilies and budding vines; and now, with even more delight, in some sheltered inlet on the level shore of St. Honorat, some tiny cove where the water was clear and exquisite in colouring as ever dreamer imagined that jasper sea of the Apocalypse. Sometimes they landed and took their picnic luncheon under the pine trees, or on the edge of the sea—Peggy keenly interested in everything she saw, the time-worn fortress-monastery that rose tall above the level shore, and the modern building with its low-roofed cells and modest chapel, a building whose monastic rule forbade the entrance of Peggy and all her sex, and which therefore inspired the liveliest curiosity on her part. Not less delightful was the sister island of St. Marguerite, with its thrilling mystery of the nameless prisoner, whom Peggy would have to be none other than a twin brother of the great Louis, and whose faded red velvet chair she looked at with affection and awe.

“To think of his meekly worshipping in this chapel, with an iron mask upon his face, when he might have been reigning over France and making war all over Europe, like the great King.”

“But in that case Louis must have been here. You wouldn't have a brace of monarchs, Peggy. One brother must have gone to the wall,” argued Vansittart.



"They needn't have shut him up in a dungeon, and made him wear a mask," said Peggy.

"True, Peggy; the whole story involves a want of common sense which makes it incredible. I no more believe in a twin brother of Louis Quatorze than in a twin brother of our Prince of Wales, languishing in the Tower of London at this present moment."

"But you believe there was a masked prisoner," exclaimed Peggy, with keen anxiety.

"Oh, yes, I am willing to believe in the Italian exile. The record of that gentleman's existence seems tolerably reliable, and a very bad time he had of it. They managed things wonderfully well in those days. A political agitator, or the writer of an unpleasant epigram, could be promptly suppressed. They had prison walls for inconvenient people of all kinds."

Peggy sighed. She did not care about the Italian politician. She had read her Dumas, and had a settled belief in the royal twin. She liked to think that he had lived and suffered in that cold grey fortress. She cared nothing for Marshal Bazaine, and his legendary leap from the parapet, which the soldier guide recited with his tongue in his cheek. She despised Vansittart for being so curious about an event which was utterly without romance—an elderly general creeping out of captivity under the nose of guardians who were wilfully blind, and going comfortably away in a steamer.

Those tranquil days on the islands or on the sea would have been as exquisite for Eve as for Peggy if the heart of the elder sister had not been heavy with anxiety about the younger. During the first few weeks in that soft climate Peggy's chance had seemed almost



a certainty of cure. Even Dr. Bright had been hopeful for those first weeks, surprised into hopefulness by the marked improvement in his patient; but of late he had been grave to despondency, and every consultation strengthened Eve's fears.

Indeed, there was little need of medical science to reveal the cruel truth. Every week that went by left something of Peggy's youth and strength behind it. The walks which were easy for her in February were difficult in March, and impossible in April. The ground that was lost was never regained. Eve looked back, and remembered how Peggy had walked to the Signal with her a fortnight after their arrival. They had walked very slowly, and they had sat down to rest several times in the course of the journey; but the ascent had been accomplished without pain, and Peggy had been wild with delight at the prospect which rewarded them at the top.

"We'll come up here often, won't we, Eve?"

"As often as you like, darling."

The second ascent was made in March, when the peach trees and anemones were all in bloom, and the gold of the mimosas was a glory of the past. This time Peggy found the winding walks long and wearisome, and although, in spite of Eve's entreaties, she persisted in reaching the summit, the journey had evidently been too much for her. She sank exhausted on a bench, and it was nearly an hour before she was rested enough to mount the little platform on which the telescope stood, and explore the distance, looking for the French squadron which was rounding the point of Esterelles, on its way to Toulon. Poor little Peggy! She was the



only person who did not believe in the seriousness of her case.

"You and Dr. Bright make too much fuss about me," she said to Eve, seeing tears in the fond sister's eyes. "I am only growing. See how short my frock is! I have grown inches since Christmas."

She stretched out her thin legs—so thin as to make the feet look abnormally big, and contemplated the spectacle with a satisfied air.

"I am going to be very tall," she said. "I have only outgrown my strength. That is all that is the matter with me. Sophy and Jenny always said as much. And as for the cough which seems to frighten you so, it's only a stomach cough. Sophy said so."

Vansittart had procured every contrivance which could make Peggy's life easier. He bought her a donkey, on whose back she could be carried up to the Signal, and when her own back grew too weak to endure the fatigue of sitting on the donkey he bought her a wheel chair, which a patient Provençal two-legged beast of burden was willing to drag about all day, if Peggy pleased. And at each stage of her weakness—at each step on the downward road—he found some contrivance to make locomotion easier, so that Peggy might live out of doors, in the sunshine and on the sea.

Alas! there came a day when Peggy no longer cared to be carried about, when even the ripening loveliness of the land, the warmth and splendour of the southern spring, the white-sailed skiff with its quaint old sailors talking their unintelligible Cannois, and chivalrously attentive to Peggy's lightest wish—the time came when even these things could not tempt her from the invalid



couch in the garden, where she lay and watched the opening orange blossoms, and wondered who would be there to mark the first change from green to gold in the turn of the year, or thought of Eve's wedding and the orange wreath in her hair, and marvelled to remember how strong her young limbs felt in that gladdest of midsummers, and how slight a thing it had been to walk to the Roman village upon Bexley Hill, or to the pine-crowned crest of Blackdown. And now Vansittart had to carry her to the sofa in the orange grove, and she lay there supine all through the golden afternoon, while Eve, who was said to be herself in delicate health, sat in a low chair near her, and read aloud from Dumas' historical novels, or some fairy tale.

But this increasing weakness of hers was of no consequence, Peggy protested, when she saw Eve looking anxious about her. She had only outgrown her strength. When she had done growing she would be as strong as ever, and able to climb those Sussex hills just as well as ever. But she would not be here to see the flower change to the fruit. That miracle of Nature's handicraft would be for other eyes—for the eyes of some other weakling, perhaps, passing, like Peggy, through the ordeal of overgrowth. But there was something far more wonderful than tree or flower, which had been whispered about by Peggy's nurse. There was the hope of a baby nephew or a baby niece in the first month of summer, a baby that was to open its eyes on some cool Alpine valley, to which Mr. and Mrs. Vansittart and their charge would migrate, when the plane trees by the harbour had unfolded their broad leaves, and the sun that looked upon Cannes was too fierce for any but the hardy



natives of the old fishing village. In that sweet summer time a baby was to appear among them, and take its place in all their hearts and on all their knees, and was to reign over them by the divine right of the firstborn. Peggy's nurse told her that, were it only for the sake of this new-comer, she ought to take care of herself, and get well quickly.

"You wouldn't like not to see the baby, would you, Miss Margaret?"

Peggy always felt inclined to laugh when her prim attendant called her Miss Margaret. She had never been addressed by her baptismal name by any one else; but Benson was a superior person, who had lived only in the best families, and who did everything in a superior way.

"Like not to see Eve's baby? Why, of course I shall see it—see it and nurse it, every day of my life," answered Peggy.

"Of course, miss, if you are well enough when June comes."

"If—I—am—well—enough," Peggy repeated slowly, turning towards the nurse with an earnest gaze. "Perhaps you mean that I may not live till June. I heard you say something about me to the housemaid yesterday morning when she was making your bed. I was only half asleep; though I was too drowsy to speak and let you know I could hear all you were saying. You are quite wrong—both of you. I have only outgrown my strength. I shall grow up into a strong young woman, and I shall be very fond of Eve's baby. I shall be the first aunt he will know."



She stopped to laugh—a hoarse little laugh, which it pained Benson to hear.

“Isn’t that absurd?” she asked. “I am calling the baby ‘he.’ But I do hope it will be a boy—I adore little boys—and I’m afraid I rather hate little girls.”

“A son and heir,” said the nurse, placidly. “That will look nice in the newspapers.”

“Yes, baby will have to be in the newspapers,” agreed Peggy. “His first appearance upon any stage. I should so love to make something for him to wear. Eve is always working for him; though she contrives to keep her work a secret, even from me. ‘Mothers’-meeting work,’ she said, when I asked her what she was so busy about. As if I didn’t know better than that! One doesn’t use the finest lawn and real Valenciennes for mothers’-meeting work. Let me make something for Eve’s baby, Benson, there’s a dear. I would take such pains with my stitches.”

“It would tire you too much, Miss Margaret.”

“No, no, it won’t. My legs are weak—not my fingers. Let me make something, and surprise Eve with it when it is finished.”

“I don’t think Mrs. Vansittart would like you to know, miss. It is a secret.”

“Yes, but Eve knows that I know. I told her that I had been dreaming about her, and that I dreamt there was a baby. It was after I heard you and Paulette whispering—I really did dream—and Eve kissed me, and cried a little, and said perhaps my dream might come true.”

Peggy being very urgent, her nurse brought her some fine flannel, as soft as silk, and cut out a flannel



shawl for the unknown, and instructed Peggy as to the manner in which it was to be made, and Peggy was propped up with pillows, and began a floss-silk scallop with neat little stitches, and with an earnest laboriousness which was a touching spectacle; but, alas! after ten minutes of strenuous labour, great beads of perspiration began to roll down Peggy's flushed face, and the thin arm and hand trembled with the effort.

"Oh, Miss Margaret, you mustn't work any more," cried Benson, shocked at her appearance.

"I'm afraid I can't, Nurse; not any more to-day," sighed Peggy, sinking back into the pillows, breathless and exhausted. "But I'll go on with baby's shawl to-morrow. Please fold it up for me and keep it in your basket. Eve mustn't see it till it's finished. The stitches are not too long, are they?"

No, the stitches were very small, but crowded one upon another in a manner that indicated resolute effort and failing sight.

"I feel as if I had been making shawls all day, like the poor woman in the poem," said Peggy. "'Stitch, stitch, stitch, with eyelids heavy and dim!' How odd it is that everything seems difficult when one is ill! I thought it was only my legs that were weak, but I'm afraid it's the whole of me. My finger aches with the weight of my thimble—the dear little gold thimble my brother-in-law gave me on Christmas Day."

She put the little thimble to her lips, and kissed it as if it were a sentient thing. Vansittart came into the room while she was so engaged.

"Oh, there you are," she said. "Do you know what I was thinking about?"



"Not I, quotha," said he, sitting down by Peggy's couch and taking her thin little hand in his. "Who can presume to thread the labyrinth of a young lady's mind, without the least little bit of a clue? You must give me a clue, Peg, if you want me to guess."

"Well, then, I was thinking of you. Is that a clue?"

"Not much of a one, my pet. You might be thinking anything—that my last coat is a bad fit about the shoulders—a true bill, Peggy; that I am growing stupid and indolent in this inconsistent climate, where one sleeps half the day and lies awake more than half the night."

"I was thinking of your goodness to Eve, and to all of us. My gold thimble; your bringing us here when you would rather have stayed in Hampshire to hunt. And I was thinking how different our lives would have been if you had never come to Fernhurst. Eve would just have gone on slaving to make both ends meet, cutting out all our frocks, and working her Wilcox and Gibbs, and bearing with father's temper, and going without things. I should have outgrown my strength all the same; but there would have been no one to bring us to Cannes. I should never have seen the Mediterranean, or the Snow Alps, or mother's grave. I should never have seen Eve in pretty tea-gowns, with nothing in the world to do except sit about and look lovely. You have changed our lives."

"For better, Peggy?" he asked earnestly.

"Yes, yes; for worlds and worlds better," she answered, with her arms round his neck.



Benson had crept off to her dinner; Peggy and her brother-in-law were alone.

"God bless you for that assurance, Peggy dear. And—if—if I were not by any means a perfect Christian—if I had done wicked things in my life—given way to a wicked temper, and done some great wrong, not in treachery but in passion, to a fellow-man—could you love me all the same, Peggy?"

"Of course I could. Do you suppose I ever thought you quite perfect? You wouldn't be half so nice if you were outrageously good. I know you could never be false or treacherous. And as for getting in a passion, and even hitting people, I shouldn't love you one morsel the less for that. I have often wanted to hit people myself. My own sister Sophy, for instance, when she has been too provoking, with her superior airs and high-flown notions. Kiss me, Jack, again and again. If you were ever so wicked I think I should love you all the same."

That was Vansittart's last serious talk with Peggy. It was indeed Peggy's last serious talk upon this planet, save for the murmured conversation in the dawn of an April day, when the London vicar, who was doing duty at St. George's, came in before an early celebration to sit beside Peggy's pillow and speak words of comfort and promise, words that told of a fairer world, whither Peggy's footsteps were being guided by an impalpable Hand—a world where it might be she would see the faces of the loved and lost—those angel faces, missed here, to be regained there.

"Do you really believe it, sir?" Peggy asked eagerly,



with her thin hand on the grave Churchman's sleeve, her imploring looks perusing the worn, elderly face. "Shall I really see my mother again—see her and know her in heaven?"

"We know only what He has told us, my dear. 'In My Father's house there are many mansions'—and it may be that the homes we have lost—the firesides we remember dimly—the faces that looked upon our cradles—will be found—again—somewhere."

"Ah, you are crying," said Peggy. "You would like to believe—just as I would. That is the only heaven I care for—to be with mother—and for Eve and Jack to come to us by-and-by."

This day, when the vicar came in the early morning, was thought to be Peggy's last on earth, but she lingered, rallied, and slowly sank again, a gradual fading—painless towards the end; for the stages of suffering which she had borne so patiently were past, and the last hours were peaceful. She could keep her arms round Eve's neck and listen to the soothing voice of sorrowing love, till even this effort was too much, and the weak arms relaxed their hold, and were gently laid upon the bed in that meek attitude which looked like the final repose. She could hear Eve still—speaking or reading to her in the soft, low voice that was like falling waters—but her mind was wandering in a pleasant dreamland, and she thought she was drifting on a streamlet that winds through the valley between Bexley Hill and Blackdown; through summer pastures where the meadow-sweet grew tall and white beside the



water, and where the voices of haymakers were calling to each other across the newly cut grass.

"I should like to have lived to see your child," were Peggy's last words, faltered brokenly into Eve's ear as she knelt beside the bed.

There were long hours of silence; the mute faint struggles of the departing spirit; but that wish was the last of Peggy's earthly speech.

Eve was broken-hearted. She never knew till the end came how she had clung to some frail thread of hope; in spite of the Destroyer's palpable advance; in spite of the physician's sad certainty; in spite of her husband's gentle warnings, striving to prepare her for the end. The blow was terrible. Vansittart trembled for life and reason when he saw the intensity of her grief. Always highly strung, she was in a condition of health which made hysteria more to be dreaded. The brief delay between death and burial horrified her; yet to Vansittart that swift departure of the lifeless clay seemed an unutterable relief. For just a few hours the wasted form lay on the rose-strewn bed; and then in the early dimness, before the mists had floated up from the valley, before harbour and parish church stood out clear and bright in the face of the morning sun, came the bearers of the coffin, and at nine o'clock Vansittart went alone to see the loved youngest sister laid in the cemetery on the hill, in the secluded corner he himself had chosen—near the mother's grave—as a spot where Eve might like to sit by-and-by, when sorrow should be less poignant, a nook from which she could see the shallow bay, and the cloud-capped islands



jutting out into the sea, and the tall white lighthouse of Antibes, standing up above the crest of the hill, glorified in the afternoon sun, as if it were nearer heaven than earth.

In everything that Vansittart did at this time his thought was of Eve and her feelings. His grief for her sorrow was no less keen than the sorrow itself. He had been very fond of poor little Peggy, and had grown fonder of her as her weakness increased, and strengthened her claim upon his compassion. But now he saw with Eve's eyes, thought with Eve's mind, and every sigh and every tear of hers wrung his heart afresh.

Those earnest words of Peggy's, spoken with the wasted arms about his neck, were very precious to him. It seemed as if they were in some wise his absolution for the wrong which he had done in keeping the secret of Harold Marchant's death. Peggy had told him that she and her sister owed comfort and happiness to him—that he had changed the tenor of their lives from struggling penury to luxury and ease. He knew that over and above all these material advantages he had given Harold Marchant's sister a profound and steadfast love—a love which would last as long as his life, and which was and would be the governing principle of his life—and he told himself that in keeping that dark secret he had done well.

Tranquillized by this assurance he put aside the old fear as something to be forgotten. But there was a nearer fear, a fear which had grown out of Peggy's illness and death, which no casuistry could lessen or thrust aside. The fear of hereditary phthisis came upon him in the dead of night, and flung its dark shadow



across his path by day. He had talked long with Dr. Bright after Peggy's death, and the kind physician had calmly discussed the probabilities of evil; had held nothing back. Fear there must needs be, in such a case; but there was also ground for hope. Vansittart told the doctor of Eve's buoyant spirits and energy, her long walks and untiring pleasure in natural scenery. "That does not look like hereditary disease, does it?" he asked, pleading for a hopeful answer.

"Those are good signs, no doubt. Your wife is of an active temperament, highly nervous, but with a very happy disposition. Her sister's fatal illness has tried her severely; but we must look to the arising of a new interest as the best cure for sorrow."

"Poor Peggy! Yes, we shall brood less upon her loss when we have our little one to think about."

The thought of Eve's coming happiness as a mother was his chief comfort. She could not fail to be consoled by the infant whose tender life would absorb her every thought, whose sleeping and waking would be a source of interest and anxiety. But before the consoler's coming there was a dreary interval of weeks to be bridged over, and this was a cause of fear.

There was a journey to be taken, for the climate of Cannes would be too hot for health, or even for endurance, before mother and child could be moved. Thus it was imperative that they should move without delay. Indeed, Vansittart thought they could not too soon leave the house and garden so closely associated with the image of the dead—where everything recalled Peggy, and the alternating hopes and fears of those gradual, sad stages on her journey to the grave. On this path



her feet had tripped so lightly last February, when her illness was talked of as "only a cough." Under this giant eucalyptus her couch had been established in April, when walking had become a painful effort, and she could only lie and absorb the beauty of her surroundings, and talk of the coming days in which she would be strong again, and able to go up to the Signal with Jack.

Vansittart fancied that Eve would catch eagerly at the idea of leaving that haunted house; but her grief increased at the thought of going away.

"I like to be here in the place she loved. I can at least console myself with remembering how happy she was with us; and what a joy Californie and the wild walks above Golfe Juan were to her. Sometimes I think she is in the garden still. I lie upon the sofa here and watch the window, expecting to see her come creeping in, leaning upon the stick you gave her—so white and weak and thin—but so bright, so patient, so lovable."

Then came the inevitable burst of tears, with the threatening of hysteria, and it was all her husband could do to tranquillize her.

"The comfort you get here is a cruel comfort, dearest," he said. "We shall both be ever so much better away from Cannes—at St. Martin de Lantosque, in the cool clear mountain air. Our rooms are ready for us, we shall have our own servants, and if the accommodation be somewhat rough——"

"Do you think I mind roughness with you? I could be happy in a hut. Oh, Jack, you are so patient with my grief; there are people who would say I am foolish to grieve so much for a young sister; but it is the first



time Death has touched us since mother went. We were such a happy little band. I never thought that one of us could die, and that one the youngest, the most loving of us all."

"Dearest, I shall never think your grief unreasonable; but I want you to grieve less, for my sake, for the sake of the future. Think, Eve, only think what it will be to have that new tie between us, a child, belonging equally to each, looking equally to each for all it has of safety and of gladness upon this earth."

## CHAPTER V.

### "FROM THE EVIL TO COME."

VANSITTART and his wife never went to the village in the mountains, where all things had been made ready for their coming. Eve spent that afternoon which should have been her last at Cannes in the burial-ground on the hill, now in its glory of May flowers, a paradise of roses and white marble, a place full of tenderest memorials to the early dead, a spot which seemed especially dedicated to those whom the gods love best, the holy ones and pure of spirit, removed from the evil to come for hard middle-life and selfish old age. Eve gave herself up to the luxury of grief on that last day, taking her fond farewell of that quiet bed where, under a coverlet of pale yellow roses, the happy child slept the everlasting sleep. She lingered, and lingered, as the sun sloped towards the dark ridge of hills; lingered when the great flaming disc touched the rugged line, until there was only the afterglow to light her back to Californie. Vansittart had trusted her alone with the



steady Benson, now promoted from Peggy's nurse to be Eve's own maid. He had cheques to write and final arrangements to make on this eve of departure; and he thought that there would be greater tranquillity for Eve in solitude, with only an attendant. It was better there should be no one to whom she could expatiate on her grief, for her talk with him had always tended to hysteria. Thus convenience and prudence had both counselled his leaving her to herself; and it was only when the clock on the mantelpiece chimed the quarter before eight and the shadows deepened in the corners of the room that he felt he had been imprudent. He went hurriedly out to the terrace in front of the villa, and felt that creeping chillness in the air which follows quickly upon sundown on this southern shore. The carriage stopped at the gate as he went out, and Eve was in his arms, to be welcomed first and scolded afterwards.

"It is with you I am most angry, Benson," he said to his wife's attendant; "you ought to have been wiser."

"I won't have you scold Benson," remonstrated Eve; "it is my fault. She teased me to come home ever so long ago, and I wouldn't. I wanted to stay with Peggy till the last moment. It was like bidding her good-bye again. It may be years before we come back to Cannes. I didn't know how late it was till we were in the carriage coming home, and I began to feel rather chilly."

"You are shivering now, Eve. You should have remembered what Dr. Bright said about sunset."

"Ah, that was on Peggy's account. It is different for me."



"Well, I won't try to frighten you into a cold. Run to Mrs. Vansittart's room, Benson, and light a good fire. I ordered tea to be ready."

He almost carried Eve up-stairs, and with his own hands manipulated the olive logs, and set the merry pine cones blazing and crackling, while she lay on the sofa in front of the fireplace and watched the flames; but the shivering continued in spite of the cheery wood fire, and eiderdown coverlet, and hot tea; so Dr. Bright was sent for hurriedly, and came to find his patient with a temperature that indicated grave disturbance. He came, and left only to come back again; and again and again as night deepened, at intervals of two or three hours; and between midnight and morning the young wife's existence trembled in the balance, and the husband, pacing to and fro and in and out on the lower floor, ground his teeth and beat his head in a passion of self-reproach, hating himself for having allowed that perilous visit to the cemetery, cursing himself for his folly in not having gone with her if she must needs go.

"There is a blight upon us and upon our love," he told himself in his despair. "Nemesis will have her due."

His fondest hope was blighted—the hope of a living link which should bind him closer to his wife and make severance impossible—a child, whose innocent eyes should turn from father to mother, and plead to the mother for the father's sin—the child who, in direst contingency, was to be his champion and his saviour. He passed through an ordeal of such agony and apprehension on his wife's account as to make him for



the time being comparatively indifferent to the loss of his son, who came upon this mortal scene only to vanish from it for ever; but when at last, in mid-June, when Californie and her fir woods were baking under a tropical sun, his wife was restored to him, strong enough to travel to cooler regions in the shadow of the great Alps, there fell upon him the sense of an irreparable loss.

They went by easy stages to Courmayeur, and established themselves there for the rest of the summer, in a reposeful solitude, keeping aloof from the climbers and explorers and the race of tourists generally. They had their own rooms, in a "Dépendance" of the hotel, rooms whose windows commanded valley and mountain. Here Eve first felt the tranquillizing influence of Alpine scenery, and her quiet rambles with Vansittart soon brought back the bloom of her girlish beauty, and restored something of the frank gladness of those younger years when she and her sisters used to ramble over the undulating ridge of Bexley Hill, and think it a mountain.

"Dear old Bexley," sighed Eve, with her eyes dreamily contemplating Mont Chétif; "I hope I shall never begin to despise you, even though you are a hill to put in one's pocket as compared with these white giants."

The peaceful days, the perfect union between husband and wife, revived Eve's spirits and did much to restore her health, sorely shaken by the ordeal through which she had passed. Fever had raged fiercely in the battle between life and death, and the long bright hair, which had made so fair a diadem in the days of her poverty, had been shorn from the burning head. She



looked quaintly pretty now, with her boyish crop, framing the broad, white forehead with crisp short curls. She laughed when Vansittart talked of next season, when his mother was to lend them the house in Charles Street.

"You can never appear in society with a cropped head for your companion," she said. "People will say you have married a lady doctor, or some other learned monstrosity from Girton. I shall be tabooed in the smart world where ignorance is *de rigueur*, and to know anything about books is a sign of inferiority."

"What care I if they think my sweet love a senior wrangler disguised as a fine lady? You are pretty enough to set the fashion of cropped heads."

They moved slowly homeward in the late autumn, loitering beside the great Swiss lakes till the October mists began to make Pilatus invisible and to hang low over the steep gables of Lucerne. They lingered under Mr. Hauser's hospitable roof so long that the great black St. Bernard lifted his head and howled an agonizing farewell when the carriage drove off to the station with Eve and her husband. That leonine beast was sagacious enough to know that the trunks and travelling-bags and bustle of departure meant something more than the daily drive, and that he was to see these kind friends no more, and eat no more sweet biscuits out of Eve's soft white hands.

It was late in October when they found themselves among the pine woods and hillocks of Hampshire, and insignificant as the hills were there was pleasure in feeling one's self at home. Eve's mother-in-law was at



Merewood to receive them, and to make much of her son's wife, whom she found thinner and more fragile-looking than when she left for the Riviera, but with all the beauty and brightness which had captivated her lover. Mrs. Vansittart's welcome had in it more of affection than she had ever given her son's wife in the past.

"I think you are beginning to love me," Eve said, too sensitive not to feel the change.

"My dear child, I always loved you."

"Only a very little," argued Eve. "You liked me pretty well in the abstract, I dare say, but you did not care for me as Mrs. John Vansittart. It was very natural. You had your own old favourites, any one of whom you would have liked Jack to marry; dear, nice girls who always wear tidy frocks, play the 'Lieder ohne Worte,' and visit the poor. I was altogether a detrimental."

"It was not you, Eve—only your people."

"My people—meaning my father. Yes, he was a stumbling-block, no doubt—a man who had gone down in the world, and about whom malevolent people said cruel things. Well, he has not been obtrusive, has he? He has kept himself in the background."

"My dear, he has been admirable, and your sisters, when I came to know them and understand them, proved altogether unobjectionable. We saw a good deal of each other while you were away."

"Sophy told me how kind you had been. Yes, they are good girls. The faults are all on the surface. But the flower of the flock is gone—the brightest and the most loving. She was all love."



"Take comfort, dear; there is deep sorrow, but there can be no bitterness in the thought of a child's death."

"Ah, that is what you religious people say," cried Eve rebelliously, "but I have not faith enough to feel that. Why should she be taken? Life was all before her, so full of happiness, of beautiful sights and sounds, and joys untasted. She was taken from the evil to come, you will say—but there might be no evil. There has been no evil in your life! See how peacefully it has glided by."

"You forget, Eve, that I have had to sorrow for a beloved husband."

"Oh, forgive me. Yes, you have felt the burden—the shadow has fallen upon you too—the shadow, and the burden of death. Why did the Creator make a beautiful world, and then spoil it?"

"Eve, this is blasphemy."

"The heart must rebel sometimes; one must ask these questions. 'The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God.' Is it only the fool who says that? Is it not the bitter cry of all humanity at some time or other?"

"Eve, you are writhing under your first sorrow. Let it turn your heart to God, not away from Him. Do you think the unbeliever's creed will give you any comfort?"

"Comfort? No. There is no comfort in religion, or in unbelief. Religion only means obedience, and public worship, and kindness to the poor, and a good orderly life. It doesn't mean the certainty of getting back our dead—somewhere, somehow, and being happy again as we have been."



"We can rest in the hope of that, Eve, knowing that we are immortal."

"Knowing? But we don't know. Nobody has ever come back to tell us. Oh, if but once, only once, for one moment in a year, our dead could come back and look at us, and speak to us, death would not be death."

Mrs. Vansittart spoke no more of comfort. It was better perhaps to let the troubled heart tire itself out with grieving. Tranquillity would come afterwards.

"And our son, our son who breathed only to die. He did not live even long enough for baptism. He was dead when the Bishop came hurriedly from his house on the hill. You think perhaps—you who are a strict Anglican—that his soul is in limbo—that he will never see the throne of God. We were going to be so fond of him, Jack and I—and Peggy wanted to live long enough to see him—but she was gone before he came, and he didn't care about living. If she had been well and happy all things would have been different. They would have been running about together in a year or two from now. And now she would have been carrying him about in her arms. He would have been beginning to notice people, and to laugh and coo like that cottager's child we saw yesterday, just about as old as my baby would have been now."

"My dearest, do you suppose I am not sorry for your loss and for your husband's? But God never meant us to rebel, even in our grief. That must not be."

"I know I am wicked," said Eve, with a long-drawn sigh. "I have my fits of wickedness. In church yesterday, on my knees at the altar, I thought that I was



resigned. I almost believed in the heaven where we shall see and know our friends again."

The dark hour passed, and at sunset, when Vansittart came home from a long day in the plantations, his wife received him with her brightest smile. His coming back after a few hours' absence was enough for a festival.

She had spent a day at Fernhurst, and the sight of her three sisters in their somewhat ostentatious mourning had renewed her grief. Eve had sent them money for mourning, which largesse they had spent conscientiously, and so were swathed in crape and distinctly funereal of aspect.

There were Peggy's sisters, whose very existence recalled her image too vividly; and there was Peggy's room, the room which she had shared with Hetty; and the little bed where she had slept so peacefully, with her nose almost touching the sloping roof, before the cruel cough took hold of her, and disturbed those happy, childish slumbers, with their visions of fairyland, or of castles in the air which seemed solid and real to the dreamer. Everything in that cottage chamber suggested her who slept in a far lovelier spot.

The room remained just as the child had left it. Peggy's things were sacred. There was her workbox, the substantial, old-fashioned rosewood box, inlaid with mother-o'-pearl, and lined with blue silk, the old, old blue, a colour such as modern taste holds up to scorn—for the box was nearly half a century old, and had belonged to Peggy's grandmother first and to her mother afterwards. It had been given to Peggy because she was the youngest, and the little stock of trinkets was ex-



hausted by the time her four sisters had each received a souvenir. The amethyst earrings, utterly unwearable, for Eve; the watch which had not gone for years, to Sophy; and a couple of poor little brooches for Jenny and Hetty. After these jewels had been dealt out there remained only the workbox for Peggy. It had been to her a source of infinite delight. What treasures of doll's clothing, what varieties of fancy-work; kettle-holders, never to be polluted by a kettle; mats, never finished; Berlin-wool cuffs, and point-lace handkerchiefs. Peggy had seldom finished anything; but the rapture of beginning things had been intense, a fever of enjoyment.

There were her books upon a little carved Swiss shelf, by her bed. Her lesson-books, thumbed and dog's-eared, everybody else's lesson-books before they descended to her; that "*Grammaire des Grammaires*" over which the whole family had toiled, and the Primers which make learning easy and people the world with smatterers. There were gift-books, birthday presents from governess or sisters; the immortal Swiss Family, Grimm, Hans Andersen, Bluebeard, Cinderella. How many a summer dawn Peggy had lain upon that pillow, reading the old fairy-tales before a foot was stirring in the house. Her bed was there, with the prettiest of Bellagio rugs laid over it, sacred as a shrine. The little room would have been far more convenient for Hetty if that bed had been taken down and put away; but no one dreamed of removing it. There would have been unlovingness in the mere suggestion.

Well, they had all to do without Peggy henceforward. There was one link gone from the chain of love. Vansittart looked round at his sisters-in-law's faces



with an agonized dread. Who would be the next? Which among that tainted flock would be the first to show the inherited poison, the first to feel the cold hand of the destroyer?

They all looked bright and healthy. They had all the fair complexion and fine roseate bloom which mark the typical English beauty, a loveliness of colour which can almost afford to dispense with perfection of form. They were slenderly made. In a doctor's parlance, there was not much of them to fall back upon—not much in hand at the beginning of a long illness. They were tall and willowy, rather narrow-chested, Vansittart noted with a pang. Yes, assuredly Eve was the flower of the flock. Her chest was broader, her throat fuller and more firmly moulded than the chests and throats of her sisters. The poise of her head was more decided, her whole bearing argued a stronger constitution. She was the offspring of her mother's youth, before any indication of disease had darkened the young life. She was the offspring of her father's early manhood. The doctors had argued well for her on this account.

The winter was spent very quietly at Merewood. Vansittart hunted and shot, and he often went home earlier in the winter dusk than became him as a sportsman, in order to take tea with Eve beside the fire. His mother lingered at Merewood, so that Eve should not be alone, the link between the two women strengthening day by day. The sisters came over from Haslemere, and enjoyed all the luxuries of a well-ordered house. Eve and her husband went for two or three short visits to Redwold Towers, and Sir Hubert and Lady Hartley



came to Merewood; he for the last of the pheasants—having pretty nearly cleared his own woods, extensive as they were—she for the pleasure of being with Eve, to whom she was sincerely attached.

And so the winter went by, a not unhappy winter—how could a young wife be unhappy, adoring and adored by her husband? Hymen's torch glowed with gentlest light beside that hearth where the pine logs were heaped so liberally, pine logs from Vansittart's paternal woods.

Eve was in high health at Easter, radiant, full of life and spirits, albeit in no wise forgetful of that grave on the hill where the Maréchal Niel roses were growing so luxuriantly, and which was being carefully tended by stranger hands. There are those at Cannes who take a loving pride in that Garden of Death, whose care it is that this silent world above the fairest of seas should be for ever beautiful, a paradise of rest, the very memory whereof should be sweet in the thoughts of the bereaved. Eve could think now with resignation of that tranquil spot, and of the young life which had come to a sudden pause on earth. Was it a full stop, or only a hyphen? Was it the end of the book, or only the bottom of the page, with the last word repeated over-leaf, to carry on the story without a break?

Mrs. Vansittart insisted that her children should have the free use of the house in Charles Street for the London season. She wanted Eve to enjoy the privileges of her position as the wife of a man of good family and good means. She had also a lingering hope that in the high pressure of London society her son might awaken to some worthy ambition—political or social, and might try to make his mark in the world. She had always



been ambitious for him—had always wanted him to do something more than shoot his own pheasants, improve the cottages on his estate, and live within his means. For a young man of his social status, the political arena offered fair scope for ambition, and Mrs. Vansittart had the common idea that any man of good abilities can succeed in politics.

## CHAPTER VI.

“SO VERY WILFUL.”

ANOTHER Easter over, another season beginning, and with all the usual auguries of a season of exceptional splendour—auguries to be exchanged later for dismal elegies upon a season of surpassing dulness, and trade stagnation, which had disappointed everybody, and all but ruined the West End purveyors. As this jubilant vaticination and these melancholy wailings are repeated year after year, they have come to be of little more significance than the cheerful chirping of the newly arriving swifts under the eaves, or the twittering of the departing swallows assembled for their autumnal flight. Seasons come and seasons go. People are hopeful before the fact, and disappointed after the fact; the great chorus of humanity goes on. Such is life. A season of hope and disillusion. Contemplate existence from the severest standpoint of the agnostic metaphysician, or from the most exalted platform of the Christian saint, and the ultimate fact is the same. We begin in hope to end in sorrow.

For Signora Vivanti the after-Easter season began under cheeriest conditions. Her success at the Apollo



had been unbroken. The longer she acted a part, the more spirited her acting became. Ignorant and uncultured as she was, she possessed the gift of "gag," knew when and where to introduce a word or a look which delighted her audience; and the management and her brother and sister artists—more especially the brothers—gave her full scope. These little inspirations of hers became licensed liberties, and her *rôle* grew and strengthened under her hands. She was the most popular actress who had appeared at the Apollo since the building of the theatre.

So at Easter the impresario increased the lady's salary for the fourth time since her *début*. He knew what tempting offers had been made to her by managers and by agents—how eager one was to send her to America, what dazzling lures another held out for Australasia. Happily, la Vivanti liked London—big, dirty, bustling London—and was content to make her fortune within the sound of Big Ben, whose mighty voice came booming along the tide to Chelsea when the wind blew from the east.

Lisa was making her fortune as fast as ever a young woman of moderate desires could wish to make it. To herself she appeared inordinately rich. The collet necklace had now a fine half-hoop bracelet to keep it company in the strong box under Lisa's bed, and she had a number of brooches which studded her corsage like a constellation. What the outside world said of Lisa's diamonds was very different from the truth; but the Venetian neither knew nor cared what the outside world was saying. The people in the theatre were all very kind to her. They knew that she was what Mr. Hawberk



called "straight," and that the gems she flashed upon the public eye were honestly come by, the result of an economical existence. She and la Zia were able to live upon so little. A few shreds of meat, messed up in some occult manner with their perpetual pasta, which, in various forms, made the basis of almost all their food. A breakfast of coffee and rolls; a supper of highly odorous cheese, with sometimes for a festa a dish of cheap pastry from the Swiss confectioner's in the King's Road. Such a cuisine did not make much impression upon Signora Vivanti's salary. She had no servant, except a slovenly female, with depressing manners, who came two mornings a week to scrub floors, clean windows, and blacklead grates. La Zia did all the rest, and delighted in her work. To sweep and dust those palatial apartments was a perpetual joy to her, second only to the delight of tramping up and down the King's Road, exploring every greengrocer's shop till she secured the cheapest vegetables, and lamenting the Rialto, where three lemons could be had for two soldi, and where the pale, bloodless asparagus was less than a quarter the London price of that luxury. Pleasant also was it to la Zia to take the 'bus for Coventry Street, and to prowl about the foreign settlement between the churches of St. Anne and St. Giles; but oh, what a dull and dismal aspect had the restaurants and *tables d'hôte* in this quarter, as compared with the Capello Nero and the movement and brightness of the Piazza.

La Zia was happy, but in spite of an altogether phenomenal success, and of wealth that far surpassed her dreams of fortune, the same could not be said of Fiordelisa. There was that lacking in her young life



which changed her gold to dross, her laurels to worthless weeds. She had loved, and loved passionately, with all the force of her undisciplined heart, and her love had been rejected. She had steeped her soul in the promise of bliss, had told herself again and again that the kindnesses she received from the man she loved could only be given by a lover. Her notion of ethics was not wide enough or exalted enough to comprehend Vansittart's desire to atone for a great wrong, or to understand that so much gentleness and generosity could be lavished upon her by any one less than a lover. She had built her soul a palace—not of art, but of love—and when the unreal fabric fell, her disappointment had been as crushing as it was unforeseen.

After that passionate scene with Vansittart Lisa gave herself up to the luxury of grief. For days she would hardly eat enough to sustain life; for many nights she tossed sleepless on her bed, sobbing over her vanished hopes, as an undisciplined child weeps for the loss of a promised pleasure. It was only good little Tommaso Zinco's strenuous arguments which ultimately brought her to reason. La Zia could do nothing with her. She turned her face to the wall, like David, and her long blue-black hair was tangled with tossing on her pillow, and wet with her passionate tears. She would not get up, or put on her clothes, or even wash her face. It was her way of scattering ashes on her head, and rending her garments. Her grief had all the fervid unreasonableness of Oriental mourning.

La Zia was obliged to take the 'cello player into the bedroom, and show him this spectacle of angry despair.

"He has deserted her—the father of her child,"



muttered Zinco, in the vestibule, as la Zia tried to explain the situation. "That is bad, bad, bad. Very bad."

"No, no," said la Zia, shaking her head vehemently; "it is not that. He has done no wrong. He has paid for her lessons, paid her rent, he has done much for us. Only she loved him, and he did not love her. She is like a child. She will not be consoled."

Zinco nodded a vague assent, but did not believe the good aunt's assurance. Of course this man was the father of her child. Of course she had been his mistress. He had brought her from Venice, and established her in these comfortable lodgings, and now he was tired of her. These things always end so. "Chi va all'acqua si bagna, e chi va a cavallo cade."

The good little Zinco crept into the room as softly as a cat, and seated his stout and oily person by the bed, where Lisa was lying face downwards, her tearful countenance buried in the pillow, and nothing but a mass of tangled black hair visible above the gaudy Bellagio rug. He gently patted her shoulder, which acknowledged the attention with an angry shrug.

"Come, come, Cara mia," pleaded the singing-master. "Is not this a mere childishness, to cry for the moon, when we have good fortune almost at our feet? To cry because just one foolish young man among all the men in the world is not wise enough to know that there is no more beautiful woman than us in London! And not to eat, and not to sleep, and to cry and sob all day and night. Ahimé, che bestia! This is just the very way to lose our voice, to become mute as one of those nightingales whose tongues were cut out to flavour the pasta



for Vitellius. Was there ever such foolishness? Were I a beautiful girl with a fine voice, I would be queen of the world. If he has been cold and cruel show him what a pearl he has lost. It is not by lying here and crying that you will bring him to reason. Get up and dress yourself, and come to the piano. I'll wager you will not be able to take the upper C in 'Roberto.'"

Lisa listened in sullen silence, but she did listen, and it seemed to her that the words of Zinco were the words of wisdom. To lose her voice—her voice which was her fortune—and to lose her good looks, which alone had lifted her from the herd of peasants, living in penury, toiling from sunrise to sunset, unknown and ill-clad, and dying uncared for, save by creatures as poor and as hopeless as themselves! Yes, Zinco was right; that would indeed be foolishness, and not the way to win him whose love her sick soul longed for. Perhaps if she were a public singer, and all the world admired her, he would admire her too. He would see in the eyes of other men that she was handsome, and worthy to be admired. He would hear on the lips of other men that she was worthy of praise.

"I'll get up," she said, without lifting her tear-stained face from the pillow. "Go into the sala and wait for me. I won't be long. You shall see I haven't lost my voice."

"Bene, benissimo, Si'ora," cried the master, rubbing his fat little hands, "now she speaks like a woman of spirit. She is not going to give up the world for love, like Marc Antony at Actium."

He shuffled off to the sitting-room, seated himself at the piano, and began to play the symphony of "Una



Voce" with that grandly decisive style of a man who has played all his life in an orchestra. It was a refreshment to Lisa's weary spirit to hear that sparkling music, light, gay, capricious as the summer wavelets.

She joined her teacher at the piano in a much shorter time than that in which a young Englishwoman could have completed her toilet, yet she looked fresh enough in her southern beauty, and there were glittering water-drops in her hair which gave a suggestion of a young river goddess.

"Now then, sir, play 'Roberto,' and you will see if my voice is broken."

She attacked the scena with wonderful dash and spirit, and was, in sporting phraseology, winning easily till she came to that C in alt—but here her voice snapped. She tried a second time, and a third time—but the note was gone. She gave a cry of rage, and then burst into tears.

"Ecco," exclaimed Zinco, with a triumphant air, "that is what your love-sick nonsense has done for you. You have been singing as false as a prima donna at a *café chantant* in the Boulevard St. Michel, and your upper C is gone. It would have been worth £40 a week to you, but you have thrown it away."

At this, Lisa continued her lamentation, deeply sorry for herself.

"There's no use in crying," said Zinco; "that only makes things worse. Bisogna sempre aver pazienza in questo mondo. You had better dry your tears and eat a beefsteak—bleeding—and drink a pint of port-beer. Malibran used to drink port-beer. In one of her great scenes she had her quart pot on the stage, hidden be-



hind a set piece—a rock, or what not—and after her cavatina she would rush to the back of the stage and drink; ah, how she would drink!"

"I don't want to lose my voice," sobbed Lisa, to whom Malibran was but an empty name.

"No. Yet you go just the right way to lose it. Come, cheer up, Si'ora. Eat much steaks, drink much stout, for the next three days. Andiamo adagio! Don't sing a note till I come next Saturday afternoon to give you your lesson."

Zinco's policy prevailed. Lisa fretted sorely at the thought of losing that voice which was to be her fortune. She had told herself in her despair that fame and fortune would be useless without the man she loved—that she had only wished to succeed as a singer in order to please him. And now she began to see the situation in a new light. She wanted to be admired and famous like the singers whom she had seen at Covent Garden, bending beneath a load of bouquets, while the house resounded with applause. She wanted to be applauded like those famous singers, so that the cruel Smith might see her, and be sorry that he had refused her his heart. Who could tell? Perhaps seeing her so admired, hearing her voice ring clear and sweet through the theatre, he might abandon his tuneless English sweetheart, and come back to Lisa, come back as lover, as husband. Zinco had told her that a fashionable prima donna could not look too high. She would have all London at her feet. It would be for her to choose.

Lisa had a strong will, and a wonderful power of self-command when she really wanted to command her-



self; so she dried her tears, ate British beef, almost raw, and drank British stout; and under this régime her nerves speedily recovered from the rude shaking which passion had given them, and when the good little 'cello player came to give her the Saturday lesson, her voice rang out sound as a bell, and B natural was produced with perfect ease—a round and perfect note.

“We’ll wait till next Tuesday for the C,” said Zinco, “and we won’t try ‘Roberto’ for a week or so. Stick to the Solfeggi.”

“And I have not lost my voice, Caro?”

“No more than I have lost a thousand pounds, Poveretta.”

After this things went smoothly. Life seemed very dreary to Fiordelisa without the friend whose rare visits had been her delight; but life was braced and fortified by a steady purpose. She meant to win the great British public; and behind that indefinite monster there shone the image of the man she loved. He would go to the theatre where she sang. He would see her, and understand at last that she was beautiful and gifted and worthy to be loved.

“And then he knows that I love him with all the strength of my heart,” she said to herself. “That ought to count for something. Yet when I told him of my love he shrank from me, as if he hated me for loving him. That is his cold English nature, perhaps. An Englishman does not like unmasked love.”

Lisa was two years older than in that day of despair, and Zinco’s promises had been realized. She had the town at her feet; and if the coronet matrimonial



had not yet been laid there she had received plenty of that adulation and of those advances which cannot be accepted without peril. All such advances Lisa had rejected with a splendid scorn. Carriages, servants, West End apartments, and St. John's Wood villas had been offered her; but she still rode in penny omnibuses or twopenny steamers, or trudged valiantly in cheap shoes. She might have had an open account with any silk mercer in London. She might have had her frocks made by the dressmaker on the crest of fashion's changeful wave—but she was content to wear a black stuff gown, with a bit of bright ribbon tied round her neck, and another bit twisted in her hair. When she wanted to look her best she put on her bead necklace—one of those necklaces which the man she loved bought for her in the Procuratie Vecchie on that fatal night. The idea that he had bought the murderous dagger at the same shop in no wise lessened her pleasure in these gifts of his.

Among her numerous admirers one only had been received by the lady and her aunt, and that was Wilfred Sefton, who had contrived to establish a footing in the Signora's drawing-room before Zinco could protest against his admission. He had so managed as to be regarded as a friend by both aunt and niece, and the boy, whom he detested, had grown odiously fond of him. He had known Lisa for a year and a half, had seen her often, had spent long summer days in her company, and in all that time he had never addressed her as a lover. He knew, too well, from many a subtle sign and token, that she was perfectly indifferent to him, that his going or coming affected her not at all; that



she liked him and welcomed him only because his presence and his attentions made a pleasant variety in the dulness of her domestic life. He knew this. He knew that whatever she might have been in the past, she was a virtuous woman in the present, that she courted no man's admiration, and was tempted by no man's gold. Convinced of this, finding her as remote in her quiet indifference as if she had been some young patrician pacing her ancestral park in maiden meditation, fancy free, his desire to win her intensified until she seemed to him the only woman in the world worth winning. Had she been easily won he might have been tired of her before now. His "grandes passions" in the past had been of short duration. Unspeakable weariness had descended upon him as a blight; the loathing of life and all it could yield him. Lisa's indifference gave a piquancy to their relations. He told himself that he could afford to bide his time. He had done a good deal of mischief in the world; but he was not a vulgar profligate. His love was an unscrupulous but not a vulgar love.

The white kitten, a thoroughbred Persian, and a gift from Mrs. Hawberk, had grown into a great white cat, stolid, beautiful, resentful of strange caresses, but devotedly attached to Lisa and her boy. He was called Marco, after the patron saint of Venice; and he looked like the white cat of fairy tale, who might be transformed at any moment into Prince Charming.

By the time Marco had grown up Mr. Sefton had made himself accepted as a trusted and familiar friend, and in this season of ripening spring, when the lilacs



and laburnums filled the suburban gardens with perfume and colour, and when the hawthorn bushes were beginning to break into clusters of scented blossom here and there, it was his business and his pleasure to afford some glimpses of a fairer world to the little family at Chelsea.

The holiday which Fiordelisa and her belongings most enjoyed was a day on the river. They would have taken boat at Chelsea, if Sefton had allowed them, and would have been content to be rowed to Hammer-smith Bridge; but he insisted on introducing them to Father Thames under a fairer aspect; so they usually took the train to Richmond, and from Richmond Bridge Sefton rowed them to Kingston or Hampton, where they lunched at some quiet inn, and sat in some rustic inn garden, or sauntered in those lovely old Palace gardens by the river, till it was time to go back to the boat and the train, and Lisa's evening work. Sefton was too punctual and business-like to permit any risk of the singer's non-appearance. He took care that Lisa should always be at the Apollo in time for her work.

These days were very delightful to him, even in spite of Paolo, whose attentions were sometimes boring. Happily, Paolo loved the water with an instinctive hereditary passion, the instinct of amphibious ancestors, born and bred on a level with the lagunes—half on sea and half on land. It was amusement enough for him to sit in the stern of the skiff and dabble a bare arm in the stream, or to watch the little paper boats which la Zia made for him, or the great white swans which hissed menaces at him with horizontal necks as they paddled slowly by, sacrificing grace and stateliness in their un-



reasoning anger. Sefton put up with Paolo, and was happy in the society of two ignorant women, delighting in Lisa's *naïveté*, finding a delicious originality in all her remarks upon life and the world she lived in, her stories of green-room quarrels and side-scene flirtations. Talk which might have sounded silly and vulgar in English was fascinating in Italian—all the more fascinating in that Venetian dialect which so languidly slurred the syllables, lazily dropping the consonants, and which had in its soft elisions something child-like and innocent that touched Sefton's fancy. He took pleasure in Lisa's talk almost as if she had been a child, while those touches and sudden strokes of shrewdness, natural to the peasant of all countries, assured him that she was no fool.

He thought of Emma Hamilton, and wondered whether the charm which held Nelson till the hour of death, and made her his last thought in death, were some such child-like spontaneous charm as this of Lisa's, the charm of unsophisticated womanhood, adapted to no universal pattern, cut and polished in no social diamond-mill.

Yes, she had charmed him in their first interview, sitting out in the chilly tent, amidst the glimmer of fairy lamps. She charmed him still, after a year and a half of familiar friendship. She, the ignorant and low-born; he, the modern worldling, who had touched the highest culture at every point, strained his intellect to reach every goal, measured himself against every theory of life here and hereafter, and found happiness nowhere. She pleased him all the more because she was not a lady, and made none of the demands which the modern



lady makes over strenuously—the demand to be treated as a boon companion and yet worshipped as a goddess; the demand of your money, your mind, your time, your wit, your trouble. Lisa had no idea of women's rights, and she was grateful for the simplest festa which her admirer offered her. Never had a "grande passion" cost him so little. This girl, who had worked in the lace factory at Burano for a few pence per day, and had lived mostly on polenta, sternly refused anything in the shape of a gift, even to a bunch of flowers, if she thought they were costly.

"I like the cheap flowers best," she said, "the blue and yellow ones that they sell in the streets, or the great red poppies la Zia buys, which flame in the fireplace, as if there were a fire there."

Often, in a casual way, he had tried to get her to talk of Vansittart, but in vain. She would say nothing about him, yet she was curious to know all that Sefton could tell her about the man with whom he had seen her talking. Sefton took his revenge by a studious reticence.

"Yes, I know the man," he said, when the subject was mooted in the early days of their acquaintance.

"Do you know him intimately? Is he your friend?"

"No."

"You look and speak as if you did not like him."

"I look and speak as I feel."

"Why don't you like him?" urged Lisa.

"Who knows? We all have our likings and our antipathies."

"But if he has never injured you——"

"That is a negative merit. I dislike a good many people who have never done me any harm."



"He is going to be married, I hear."

"He is married. He was married last summer."

"Do you know his wife?"

"Yes."

"Is she beautiful?"

"Not so beautiful as you; but she has a complexion like the inside of a sea-shell. You know those pale shells, almost transparent, with a rosy flush that is less a colour than a light. She has pale gold hair, which shines round her low, broad forehead like a nimbus in one of Fra Angelico's pictures of Virgins and angels. She is rather like an old Italian picture, of that early school which chose a golden-haired ideal and left your ripe and glowing Southern beauty out in the cold. She is not so handsome as you, Bellissima."

"Yet he liked her better than he liked me. What is the good of my being handsome? He did not care," said Lisa, passionately.

It was the first time she had betrayed herself to Sefton. He smiled, and glanced from the mother's angry face to the boy, who was hanging about her knee, unconsciously reproducing the attitude of many an infant St. John.

"Yes, there can be no doubt," he told himself, "Vansittart is the man she loved, and this brat must be Vansittart's offspring."

Lady Hartley had told him that her brother had been a rambler in Italy and the Tyrol for years before her marriage.

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## CHAPTER VII.

## THE LITTLE RIFT.

IT was summer-time in London; the brief, bright butterfly season, in which the metropolis of the world puts on such a splendour of gaiety and luxury that it is hard to remember the fog and damp and dreariness of a long winter; hard to believe that this stately West End London can ever be otherwise than beautiful. Are not her hotels palaces, and her parks paradises of foliage and flowers, fashion and beauty—with only an occasional incursion from the Processional Proletariat? Country cousins seeing the great city in this joyous season may be excused for thinking that life in London is always delectable; and, bored to death in their country quarters in the dull depth of an agricultural winter, or suffering under the discomforts of a ten-mile journey behind a pair of “boilers,” on a snow-bound road, to a third-rate ball, may not unnaturally envy the children of the city their January and February dances, and dinners, and theatres, all, as these rustics imagine, within a quarter of an hour’s drive.

Eve Vansittart thoroughly enjoyed the pleasures of a London season; the jaunts and excitements by day; Hurlingham, Sandown, Ascot, Henley, Lord’s, Barn Elms; the ever-delightful morning ride, the evening drive in the Park, with its smiling flower-beds, ablaze with gaudy colour that vied with the scarlet plumes and shining



breast-plates flashing past now and again between the close ranks of carriages. Yes, London was brilliant, vivid, noisy, full of startling sights and sounds by day; and by night a city of enchantment, where one might wander from house to house to mingle in a mob of more or less beautiful women, and beautiful gowns, and diamonds that took one's breath away by their magnificence. A city of fairyland, with awnings over stately doorways, and gardens and balconies a'glitter with coloured lamps; and gorgeous reception-rooms where one heard all that there is of the most exquisite in modern music—violin and 'cello, tenor and soprano—the stars of opera and concert-hall, breathing their finer strains for the delight of these choicer assemblies.

There are circles and circles in London, as many as in the progressive After-life of Esoteric Buddhism, and it is not to be supposed that a small Hampshire squire, with a paltry three thousand a year, was in the uppermost and most sacred heaven; but the circles touch and mingle very often in the larger gatherings of the season, and though Eve Vansittart was not on intimate terms with duchesses, she often rubbed shoulders with them, and for an evening lived the life they lived, and thrilled to the same melodious strains, and melted almost to tears to the same music of Wolff or Hollmann, till pleasure verged upon pain, and, borne upon the long-drawn notes of violin or 'cello, came sad, sweet memories of the years that were gone. Vansittart knew plenty of people who were decidedly "nice," and these included a sprinkling of the nobility, and a good many givers of fine parties. His wife's beauty and charm of manner ensured her a prompt acceptance



among people outside that circle of old friends who would have accepted her as a duty, even had she been neither lovely nor amiable.

The most enjoyable parties must at last produce satiety, if they come every night, and sometimes two or three in a night; and there came a time when Eve's strength began to flag, and her spirits to droop a little in the very midst of these pleasures, this paradise of music and Parisian comedy, of dances at night, and coaching club meets in the morning.

Vansittart noticed the pallid morning face and purple shadows under the dark grey eyes.

"We are doing too much, Eve," he said anxiously. "I am letting you kill yourself."

"It is a very pleasant kind of death," answered Eve, smiling at him across the small breakfast-table, where a grilled chicken for him, a dish of strawberries for her, composed the simple repast, a repast over which they always lingered as long as their engagements allowed, since it was the only confidential hour in the day. At luncheon people were always running in; or there was a snug little party invited for that friendly meal. Dinner was rarely eaten at home, except when they had a dinner-party. "It is a very delicious death, and I shall take a long time killing. Perhaps when I am as old as Honoria, Duchess of Boscastle, I shall begin to feel I have had enough."

"My dearest, I love to see you happy and amused, but I mustn't let you wear yourself out. We must have a quiet day now and then."

"As many quiet days as you like, as long as they are spent with you. Shall we go to Haslemere and



spend a day with the girls—this very day? No, there is Maud's dinner-party to-night. Fernhurst would be too far. We could not get home to dress, without a rush, if we took a really long day on Bexley Hill."

"Fernhurst and the sisters will keep till the autumn, especially as you will be having Sophy here to-morrow."

"Yes, I shall be having Sophy"—with a faint sigh. "We shall have no more cosy little breakfasts like this for a whole week."

"Nonsense. We can send Sophy's breakfast up to her room, with strict injunctions not to get up till eleven. People who ain't used to parties always want a lot of sleep in the morning. Sophy shall be made to sleep. But, for to-day, now? What should you say to a long, lazy day on the river? We can take the train to Moulsey, and row down to Richmond."

"Too delicious for words. But there is a tea-party in Berkeley Square, and another at Hyde Park Gardens. I promised to go to both."

"Then you will go to neither. You can send telegrams from Moulsey to say you are seedy, and your doctor ordered you to take a quiet day in the country—I being your doctor for the nonce. We'll steep ourselves in the mild beauty of Old Father Thames, a poor little river when one remembers the Danube and Rhine; but he will serve for our holiday."

He rang for a time-table, found a train that was to leave Waterloo at eleven, and ordered the victoria to take them to the station.

"Now, Eve, your coolest frock, and your favourite poet to read in your luxurious seat in the stern, while I toil at the oar. Be sure you will not read a page



during the whole afternoon! The willows and rushes, the villa gardens dipping to the water's edge, the people in the passing boats, the patient barge horses on the tow-path—those will be your books, living, moving, changing things, compared with which Keats and Musset are trash, 'Endymion' colourless, 'La Carmago' a phantom."

"I'll take Musset," said Eve, pouncing upon a vellum-bound duodecimo—a *chef d'œuvre* of Zaensdorf's, which was one of Vansittart's latest gifts. "He has opened a new world to me."

"A very wicked world for your young innocence to explore; a world of midnight rendezvous and early morning assassinations; a world of unholy loves and savage revenges—the dagger, the bowl, the suicide's despair, the satiated worldling's vacuity. Yet he is a poet—ain't he, Eve?—the greatest France ever produced. Compared with that fiery genius Hugo is but a rhetorician."

They were at Hampton before noon, and on the river in the fierce golden sunlight, when old Hampton Church clock struck the hour, Eve leaning back in her cushioned seat, gazing dreamily at the lazy rower amidships. They had the current to help them, so there was no need for strenuous toil. The oars dipped gently; the church and village, Garrick's Temple, the gaily decked house-boats with gardens on their roofs and bright striped awnings, barracks, bridge, old Tudor Palace, drifted by like shadows in a dream. Eve did not open De Musset, though the ribbon marked a page where passion hung suspended in tragic possibilities; a crisis which might well have stimulated curiosity. She



was too happy to be curious about anything. It was her first holiday on the river, they two alone.

"If this is your idea of resting, let us rest very often," said Eve.

She would not hear of landing at Kingston for luncheon. She wanted nothing but the river, and the sunshine, and his company, all to herself. She would have some tea, if he liked, later; and seeing an open-air tea-house a little lower down the river, and a garden where at this early hour there were no visitors, Vansittart pushed the nozzle of his skiff in among the reeds, and they landed, and ordered tea and eggs and bread and butter to be served in a rustic arbour close by the glancing tide.

"I dare say there are water-rats about," said Eve, gathering her pale pink frock daintily round her ankles, "but I feel as if I should hardly mind one to-day. I feel too happy to mind anything, except a black beetle; and I am glad to think that those dreadful creatures are indoor horrors."

They both enjoyed this humble substitute for their customary luncheon. It was a relief to escape the conventional menu—the everlasting mayonnaise, the cutlets hot or cold, the too familiar chicken and lamb. The tea and eggs in this vine-curtained bower had the most exquisite of all flavours—a taste of novelty.

"I am so happy," cried Eve, "that I think, like Miss de Bourgh in 'Pride and Prejudice,' I could sing—if I had learnt."

"Your face is my music," said her husband, his face reflecting her happy smile: "your laughter is better than singing."



"Oh, you mustn't, you really mustn't talk like that; at least, not till our silver wedding," protested Eve. "You will have to make a speech, perhaps, on that anniversary, and you might incorporate that idea in it. 'What, ladies and gentlemen, in returning thanks for your kind compliments and this truly magnificent epergne, can I say of my wife of five and twenty blissful years, except that I love her, I love her, I love her? Her face is my music; her laughter is better than singing.' How would that do, Jack?"

Her clear laugh rang out in the still summer air. No female of the great Bounder tribe could have enjoyed herself more frankly. Vansittart would hardly have been surprised if she had offered to change hats with him.

"Five and twenty years! A quarter of a century," she said musingly. "I wonder what we shall be like, three and twenty years hence—what the world will be like—what kind of frocks will be worn?"

"Will the cylinder hat be abolished?"

"Shall we still travel by steam, or only by electricity?"

"What gun-maker will be in vogue?"

"What kind of lap-dog will be the rage?"

So laughingly they dawdled an hour away, having garden and arbour all to themselves, till after three o'clock, when a couple of Bounder-laden boats came noisily to the reedy bank, and their human cargo landed, scrambling upon shore, giggling, exploding into joyous cockney jests, with the true South London twang.

"Come," said Vansittart, "it is time we were off."

"Are you sure you have rested?"



"From my Herculean labours? Yes."

They drifted down the river, praising or dispraising the villas on the Middlesex shore, inhaling the sweetness of flowering clover from the Surrey fields; he leaning lazily on his sculls, she prattling to him, as much lovers as in the outset of their wooing; and so to Teddington Lock, where they had to wait for a boat to come out, before their boat went in.

It was the laziest hour of the day, and scarcely a leaf stirred among the willows on the eyot hard by. There was only the sound of the water, and the voices of the rowers, muffled by the heavy wooden gates and high walls of the smaller lock. Suddenly the doors opened. A skiff with four passengers slowly emerged from the yawning darkness, and a voice, strong, yet silvery sweet, broke upon the quiet of the scene, a voice at whose first word Vansittart started as if he had been shot.

The speaker started too, and gave a cry of surprise that was almost rapture. A girl, hatless, with dark hair heaped carelessly on the top of her small head, a girl with the loveliest Italian eyes Eve had ever seen, leaned forward over the gunwale, stretching out both her gloveless hands to Vansittart.

"It is you," she cried in Italian; "I thought I should never see you again;" and then, with a quick glance at Eve, and in almost a whisper, "Is that your wife?"

"Si, Si'ora."

The girl looked at Eve with bold searching eyes, and from her looked back again to Vansittart, as his boat passed into the lock. Her manner had been so absorbing, her beauty was so startling, that it was only



in this last moment that Eve recognized the man rowing as Sefton, and saw that the other two passengers were a stout middle-aged woman and a little boy, both of them dark eyed and foreign looking, like the girl.

When Eve and Vansittart looked at each other in the gloom of the lock both were deadly pale.

"Who is that girl?" she asked huskily.

"An Italian singer—Signora Vivanti. You must have heard of her; she is the rage at the Apollo."

"But she knows you intimately. She was enraptured at seeing you. Her whole face lighted up."

"That is the impulsive southern manner; an organ-grinder will do as much for you if you fling him a penny."

"How did you come to know her?"

"In Italy, years ago, before she began to be famous."

They were out of the lock by this time, and in the broad sunshine. Eve could see that her husband's pallor was not an illusive effect of the green gloom in that deep well they had just left.

He was white to the lips.

Sefton! Sefton and Fiordelisa hand in glove with each other! That was a perilous alliance. And Lisa's manner, claiming him so impulsively, darting that evil look at his wife! He saw himself hemmed round with dangers, saw the menace of his domestic peace from two most formidable influences: on the one hand Lisa's slighted love; on the other Sefton's hatred of a successful rival. The intensity of these apprehensions, coming suddenly upon the happy security of his wedded life, was so absorbing that he was unconscious of Eve's pallor and of her suppressed agitation while questioning him.



"You knew her in Italy," said Eve, her head bent a little, one listless hand dabbling in the sunlit water that reflected the vivid colouring of the boat in gleams of lapis and malachite. "In what part of Italy? Tell me all about her. I am dying of curiosity. There was such odious familiarity in her manner."

"Again I must refer you to any organ-grinder as an example of southern exuberance."

"Yes, yes, that is all very fine, but Signora Vivanti must belong to a higher grade than the organ-grinder. She is not to be judged by his standard."

"There you are wrong. She is of peasant birth."

"Indeed. She certainly looks common; beautiful, but essentially common. Well, Jack, where and when did you meet her?"

"Years ago, as I told you. Where?" hesitatingly, as if trying to recall a vague memory, while lurid before his mental vision there rose the scene at Florian's, the lights, the crowd, the confused sounds of music from brass and strings, mandoline and flute, every stone of the city resonant with varied melodies. "Where?" he repeated, seeing her looking at him impatiently. "Why, I think it was in Verona."

"You think. She had a very distinct memory of meeting you, at any rate"—with a little scornful laugh. "If you were her dearest, closest friend, her greeting could not have been warmer."

"Mere Celtic impulsiveness. One meets with as much warmth in the south of Ireland. Hotel waiters have the air of clansmen, who would shed their blood for us. Hotel acquaintances seem as old friends."



"How did you come to know this girl—peasant-born, as you say?"

"She was in a factory, and I was going over the factory, and I talked to her, and she told me her troubles, and I was interested and—— The same sort of thing happens a dozen times on a Continental tour. You don't want chapter and verse, I hope. That memory is immeshed in a tangle of other memories. I should only deceive you if I went into particulars."

He had recovered himself by this time, and the colour had come slowly back to his face. Eve sat dumbly watching him as he bent over the sculls, rowing faster than he need have done, much faster than on the other side of the lock. He was ready to lie with an appalling recklessness if he could by so doing set up a barrier of falsehood between his wife and the true story of that night in Venice. He looked at her presently, and saw that she was troubled. He smiled, but there was no answering smile.

"My darling, you are not by way of being jealous, I hope," he said gaily. "You are not unhappy because a peasant girl held out her hands to me."

"Signora Vivanti has been long enough in England to know that a woman does not behave in that way to an almost stranger," said Eve. "Why did you look frightened at the sound of her voice when the boat came out of the lock? Why did you turn pale when she spoke to you?"

"Did I really turn pale? I suppose I was a little scared at her demonstrative address, fearing lest it should offend you. One has time to think of so many



contingencies in a few moments. But I did not imagine you would take the matter so very seriously. Come, dearest, I think you know I have but one divinity below the stars, and worship at only one shrine."

"Now, perhaps—but what do I know of the past?"

"If in the past I have admired and even fancied I loved women less admirable than yourself, be sure this woman was not one of them. No ghost of a dead love looks out of her eyes, beautiful as they are."

"I must believe you," sighed Eve. "I want to believe you, and to be happy again."

"Foolish Eve. Can it be that an irrepressible young woman's greeting could interfere with your happiness?"

"I was foolish, no doubt. Women are very foolish when they love their husbands as I love you. There are scores of women I meet who think of their husbands as lightly as of their dressmakers. Would you like me to be that kind of wife—to be lunching and gadding, and driving and dancing in one direction, while you are gadding and dining and card-playing somewhere else? I should be nearer being a woman of fashion than I am now."

"Be ever what you are now. Be jealous, even, if jealousy be a proof of love."

"There was a child in the boat—a handsome black-eyed boy. Is he her child, do you think?"

Having affected ignorance at the outset, Vansittart was forced to maintain his attitude.

"Chi lo sa?" he said, with a careless shrug.

"Was it not odd that Mr. Sefton should be escorting her?"



"Not especially odd. She is a public character, and has a herd of admirers, no doubt. Why should not Sefton be among them?"

"I never heard him mention her when he was talking of the theatres."

"Men seldom speak of the women they admire—especially if the lady is not in society—and Sefton is reticent about a good many things."

After this they talked of trifles, lightly, but with a somewhat studied lightness. Eve seemed again content; but her gaiety was gone, as if her spirits had drooped with the vanishing of the sun, which now at five o'clock was hidden by threatening clouds.

At Richmond Bridge they left their boat, to be taken back by a waterman, and walked through the busy town to the station. An express took them to London in good time for dressing and dining at Lady Hartley's state dinner. She had a large house in Hill Street this year, and was entertaining a good deal.

"My dear Eve, you are looking utterly washed out," she said to her sister-in-law in the drawing-room after dinner. "You must come to us at Redwold directly after Goodwood—you could come straight from Goodwood, don't you know—and let me nurse you."

"You are too kind. I think, though, it would be a greater rest if I were to go to Fernhurst for a few days, and let the sisters and Nancy take care of me. A taste of the old poverty, the whitewashed attics, and the tea-dinners would act as a tonic. I am debilitated by pleasures and luxuries."

"You were looking bright enough last night at Mrs. Cameron's French play."



“Was I? Perhaps I laughed too much at Coquelin cadet, or eat too many strawberries.”

Lady Hartley had an evening party after the dinner, and it was a shock for Vansittart on coming into the drawing-room at half-past ten o'clock, after a long-drawn-out political discussion with a big-wig of Sir Hubert's party, to find Sefton and Eve sitting side by side in a flowery nook near the piano, where at this moment Oscar de Lampion, the Belgian tenor, was casting his fine eyes up towards the ceiling preparatory to the melting strains of his favourite serenade—

“And thou canst sleep, while from the rain-washed lawn  
Thy lover watches for thy passing shade  
Across the blind, and sobs and sighs till dawn  
Glows o'er the vale and creeps across the glade.  
And thou canst sleep—thou heedest not his sighing;  
And thou canst sleep—thou wouldst if he were dying;  
Yes, thou canst sleep—canst sleep—sleep.”

There was a second verse to the same effect, exquisitely sung, but worn threadbare by familiarity, which Vansittart heard impatiently, watching Eve and her companion, and longing to break in upon their seclusion. They were silent now, since they could not with decency talk while De Lampion was singing.

There were only two verses. De Lampion was too much an artist to sing lengthy songs, although too lazy to extend his repertoire. He liked people to be sorry when he left off.

Vansittart dropped into a chair near his wife. The rooms had not filled yet, so there was a possibility of sitting down, and this quiet corner, screened by an



arrangement of palms and tall golden lilies, was a pleasant haven for conversation in the brief intervals between the music, which was of that superior order which is heard in respectful silence by everybody within earshot, though the people outside the room who can't hear are apt to be troublesome, a sudden buzz of multitudinous voices breaking in upon the silence whenever a door is opened.

Sefton and Vansittart shook hands directly the song was over.

"I was told you were to dine here," said Vansittart, as an obvious opening.

"Lady Hartley was kind enough to ask me, but I had an earlier engagement in Chelsea. I have been dining with the Hawberks—the composer, don't you know. Sweet little woman, Mrs. Hawberk—so sympathetic. You know them, of course?"

"Only from meeting them at other people's houses."

"Ah, you should know Hawberk. He's a glorious fellow. You must spare me an hour or two to meet him at breakfast some Sunday morning, when Mrs. Vansittart doesn't want you to go to church with her."

"I always want him," said Eve, with a decisive air.

"And does he always go?"

"Always."

"A model husband. I put down the husbands who attend the morning service among the great army of hen-pecked, together with the husbands who belong to only one rather fogeyish club. But that comes of my demoralized attitude towards the respectabilities. Well, it shall not be a Sunday, but you must meet Hawberk *en petit comité* before the season is over. He is a very



remarkable man. It was he who invented Signora Vivanti, the lady who claimed your acquaintance so effusively to-day."

"Indeed!" said Vansittart, with a scowl which did not invite further comment; but Sefton was not to be silenced by black looks.

"Did Mr. Hawberk bring Signora Vivanti from Italy?" asked Eve; and Sefton could see that she paled at the mere mention of the singer's name.

"I think not. She was established in very comfortable quarters at Chelsea when Hawberk first heard of her. Some good friend placed her there and paid for her training. The rest of her career is history. Hawberk finished her artistic education, and had the courage to trust the fate of a new opera to an untried singer. The result justified his audacity, and the Vivanti is the rage. She is original, you see; and a grain of originality is worth a bushel of imitative excellence!"

"I should like to hear her sing," said Eve.

"Then you are in a fair way of being gratified. She is to sing to-night. Lady Hartley has engaged her."

"Really! How odd that Lady Hartley never mentioned her when she was telling me about her programme."

"The engagement was made only two or three days ago, after I met Lady Hartley at Lady Belle Teddington's evening party. It was my suggestion. Musical evenings are apt to be so dismal—Mendelssohn, de Beriot, Spohr, relieved by a portentous Scotch ballad of nine and twenty verses by a fashionable baritone. Vivanti has sentiment and humour, chic and fire. She will be the bouquet, and send people away in good spirits."



A duet for violin and 'cello began at this stage of conversation, and when it was over Vansittart moved away to another part of the room, and talked to other people. It was past eleven. He knew not how soon the Venetian might appear upon the scene; but he was determined to keep out of her way. He would not risk another effusive greeting; and with a woman of her type there was no reliance upon the restraints of society. She might be as demonstrative in a crowded drawing-room as on the river Thames. Of all irritating chances what could be more exasperating than this young woman's appearance at his sister's house, even as a paid entertainer? And it was Sefton's doing; Sefton, who had seen him with Fiordelisa two years ago on the Embankment, and who had doubtless treasured up the remembrance of that meeting; Sefton, who had admired Eve and had been scorned by her, and who doubtless hated Eve's husband.

Nothing could be more disquieting for Vansittart than that Sefton should have made himself the friend and patron of Fiordelisa—even if he were no more than friend or patron. If he were pursuing the Venetian girl with evil meaning it would be Vansittart's duty to warn her. He had urged her to lead a good life—to redeem the error of her girlhood by a virtuous and reputable womanhood. It would be the act of a coward to stand aside and keep silence, while her reputation was being blighted by Sefton's patronage. True that her aunt and son had been the companions of to-day's river excursion; true that their presence had given respectability to the jaunt; yet with his knowledge of Sefton's character Vansittart could hardly believe that his intentions towards



this lovely daughter of the people could be altogether free from guile. He hated the idea of an interview with Lisa; but he told himself that it was his duty to give her fair warning of Sefton's character. She might have been Harold Marchant's wife, perhaps, with a legitimate protector, but for his—Vansittart's—evil passions. This gave her an indisputable claim upon his care and kindness—a claim not to be ignored because it involved unpleasantness or risk for himself.

He went back to Eve presently, and asked her to come into the inner drawing-room, where there were people who wanted to see her; an excuse for getting her away from Sefton, who still held his ground by her chair.

"I shall lose my place if I stir," she said; "and I want to hear Signora Vivanti."

"I'll bring you back."

"There'll be no getting back through the crowd. Please let me stay till she has sung."

"As you please."

He turned and left her, offended that she should refuse him; vexed at her desire to hear the woman who had already been a bone of contention between them. He went back to the inner drawing-room, as far as possible from the piano and the clever German pianist who had arranged the programme for Lady Hartley, and who was to accompany—somewhat reluctantly—the lady from the Apollo, whose performance might pass the boundary line of the *comme il faut*, he thought.

Vansittart stood where he could just see Lisa, by looking over the heads of the crowd. She took her stand a little way from the piano, and clear of the



audience, with admirable aplomb, though this was her first society performance. She was in yellow—a yellow crape gown, very simply made, with a baby bodice and short puffed sleeves; and on the clear olive of her finely moulded neck there flashed the collet necklace which represented the firstfruits of her success. Vansittart shuddered as he noted the jewels, for he had the accepted idea of actress's diamonds, and he began to fear that Lisa had already taken the wrong road.

She sang a ballad from the new serio-comic opera, *Haroun Alraschid*, a ballad which all the street organs and all the smart bands were playing, and which was as familiar in the remotest slums of the east as in the gardens of the west.

“I am not fair, I am not wise,  
But I would die for thee;  
My only merit in thine eyes  
Is my fidelity.  
Oh, couldst thou kill me with thy frown,  
That death I'd meekly meet,  
For it were joy to lay me down  
And perish at thy feet.”

It was the song of a slave to her Sultan, and glanced from the supreme of sentiment to the absurdity of burlesque. The song was the rage, but it was the power and passion of the singer that made it so. The sudden silvery laugh with which she finished the second verse, changing instantaneously from pathos to mocking gaiety—with a sudden change in metre and sentiment—was a touch of originality that delighted her audience, and the song was applauded to the echo. Vansittart had moved into the music-room while she sang, as if drawn irresistibly by the power of song, and he was near



enough to see his wife and Sefton talking to the singer; praising her, no doubt; uttering only the idle nothings which are spoken upon such occasions; but the idea that Eve should get to know this woman's name, that they should talk together familiarly, and above all, that Lisa should know his name, and be able to approach wife or husband whenever some wild impulse urged her attack, was dreadful to him. How could he be sure henceforward that his secret should remain a secret? Was the Venetian a person to be trusted with the power of life or death?

He went back to the inner room, and was speedily absorbed in the duty of attending two colossal dowagers with monumental necks and shoulders, and diamonds as large as chandelier drops, to steer whom down a London staircase, past a stream of people who were ascending, was no trifling work. In the dining-room the débris of dessert and the ashes of cigarettes had given place to an elegant arrangement of old Derby plates, peaches, grapes, and strawberries, chicken salad, and *foie gras* sandwiches, and to this light refreshment people were crowding as eagerly as if dinner were an obsolete custom among the upper classes. Blocked in between two great ladies, pouring out champagne for one, and peeling a peach for another, Vansittart was secure from being pounced upon by Fiordelisa. He saw Sefton sitting with her at a little table in a corner, as he piloted his aristocratic three-deckers to the door. Sefton was plying her with champagne and lobster salad, and her light joyous laugh rang out above society's languid jabber.

He hated Sefton with all his heart that night; and he was too angry with Eve to speak to her, either as



they waited in the hall for their carriage, or during the short drive home.

Never before had he treated her with this sullen rudeness. She followed him into his den, where he went for a final smoke before going up-stairs. She stood by his chair for a few minutes in silence, watching him as he lighted his cigar, and then she said gently—

“What is the matter with you to-night, Jack? Have I vexed you?”

“I don’t know that you have vexed me—but I know that I am vexed.”

“About what?”

“I didn’t like to see you so civil to Signora Vivanti. It is all very well for dowagers and fussy matrons to take notice of a public singer, but it is a new departure for you.”

“I could hardly help myself. She sang so delightfully, and I was pleased with her, and then Mr. Sefton introduced her to me. What could I do but praise her, when I really admired her?”

“No, you were blameless. It was Sefton’s fault. He had no right to introduce her to you.”

“But is she not respectable?”

“I cannot answer for her respectability. I know nothing of what kind of life she has led since she made her *début*. She wears diamonds, and that is not a good sign.”

“She does not look like a disreputable person,” said Eve, very thoughtfully. “There is something frank and simple about her. That boy must be hers, he is so like her. Do you know if she was ever married—if the boy’s father was her husband?”



"I know very little about her, as I told you to-day; but I should say not."

"Poor thing! I am very sorry for her."

"Don't waste your pity upon her. She seems perfectly happy. A peasant girl, reared upon polenta, does not consider these things so tragically as they are considered in Mayfair."

"How scornfully you speak of her. I am sure she is a good girl at heart. She remembered seeing me in the boat to-day, and she asked me if I was your wife. She repeated my name curiously, as if she had never heard it before. Did not she know your name when you met her in Verona, or wherever it was?"

"Very likely not. I was an Englishman. That might have been a sufficient distinction in her mind."

"I hope she is not leading a wicked life," said Eve, with a sigh. "She has a good face."

"Do not let us trouble about her any more," said Vansittart, looking earnestly up at the thoughtful face that was looking down at him. "She has almost brought dissension between us—for the first time."

"Only almost. We could not be angry with each other long, could we, Jack? But you must own it was enough to take any wife by surprise. A beautiful Italian girl stretching out both her hands in eager greeting, almost throwing herself out of her boat into ours. Any wife caring very much for her husband would have felt as I did—a sudden bitter pang of jealousy."

"Any wife must be a foolish wife if she felt that pang, knowing herself beloved as you do."

"Yes, I think that now you are honestly fond of me. Ah, how can I think otherwise when you have been so



indulgent, so dear? Yet in the past you might have loved that dark-eyed girl. You never pretended I was your first love. And if you did care for her, do please be candid and tell me. I should be happier if I knew the worst. It could not matter much to me, you see, Jack, that you should have been fond of her—once. Dearest, dearest,” she repeated coaxingly, with her head bent down till her soft cheek leaned against his own, “tell me the worst.”

“Eve, how often must I protest that I never cared for this girl—that she was never anything to me but a friendless woman—friendless except for an aunt as poor and as ignorant as herself. She was never anything to me—never. Are you satisfied now? As far as Fior-delisa is concerned you know the worst.”

“I am satisfied. But if you did not care for her she cared for you. She could not have looked as she looked to-day—her whole face lighting up with rapture—if she had not loved you. Only love can smile like that. But I won’t tease you. The thought of her shall never again come between us.”

“So be it, Eve. We have had our much ado about nothing. We will give Signora Vivanti a holiday. Sophy will be with you to-morrow, and will want no end of amusement—exhibitions all day and a theatre every night, with an evening party afterwards. I know what country cousins—or country sisters are. Besides, it will be Sophy’s *début*, and she will expect to make an impression.”

“I hope she will not be too fine,” said Eve, remembering Sophy’s strivings to be smart under difficulties.

“She will be as fine as the finest, be sure of that.



She will expect matrimonial offers—to be a success in her first season. Why don't you marry her to Sefton?"

"I don't like Mr. Sefton."

"But Sophy might like him, and he is rich and well born. If he is not a gentleman that is his own affair—not any fault in his race."

### CHAPTER VIII.

"POOR KIND WILD EYES SO DASHED WITH LIGHT QUICK TEARS."

SOPHY arrived next day with portentous punctuality, in time for luncheon, intent on pleasure, and dressed in a style which she believed in as the very latest Parisian fashion; for this damsel credited herself with an occult power of knowing what was "in" and what was "out," and, with no larger horizon than a country church and an occasional rustic garden-party, set up as an authority upon dress, and gave her instructions to the village dressmaker, who made up ladies' own materials, and worked at ladies' houses, with the air of a Kate Reilly directing an apprentice.

Eve had been very generous, and Sophy's costume was a great advance upon those days when Lady Hartley had talked of the sisters as Colonel Marchant's burlesque troupe. Eve had sent down a big parcel of materials from a West End draper's, the newest and the best, and Sophy had exercised her fingers and her taste in the confection of stylish garments; yet it must be owned there was an unmistakable air of home dress-making—of fabrications suggested by answers to correspondents in a ladies' newspaper—about those smart gowns, jackets,



capas, and fichus which Sophy wore with such satisfaction. This showed itself most in an unconscious exaggeration of every fashion; just as a woman who rouges, inevitably exaggerates the colouring of natural carnations. Sophy's Medici collars were higher than anybody else's. The military collar of Sophy's home-made tailor gown was an instrument of torture. Sophy's waistcoats and sleeves were more mannish and sporting than anything Redfern had produced for Eve. In a word, there was a touch of Sophy's personality about every garment; just as in every picture there is the individuality of the painter.

But Sophy, flushed with the delights of a London season, was quite pretty enough to be forgiven a little provincialism in her dress and manners, and she was well received by Eve's friends.

It was good for Eve that she should be obliged to exert herself in order to amuse Sophy, and that the sweet solitude of two was no longer possible for her and Vansittart.

He said nothing further about his wife's need of repose. He was glad to see her occupied from morning till long past midnight, showing Sophy what our ancestors used to call "the town;" but which now includes a wide range of the suburbs, and occasional garden-parties as far off as Marlow or Hatfield. He was glad of anything which could distract his wife's thoughts from too deep a consideration of his acquaintance with Signora Vivanti, and he encouraged Sophy in every form of dissipation, until he found, to his annoyance, that an evening had been allotted to the Apollo.

The fame of *Haroun Alraschid* and of Signora



Vivanti's beauty and talent had penetrated beyond Haslemere, and Sophy had written to her sister imploring her to secure places for an evening during her visit. A box had been taken six weeks in advance, and Eve, who was always indulged in every theatrical fancy, had not thought it necessary to inform her husband of the fact.

To forbid the occupation of that box would have been too marked an exercise of authority; to absent himself from the party would have made Eve uneasy; so he went with his wife and sister-in-law, and saw Lisa on the stage for the first time since he had watched her in the ranks of the Italian chorus at Covent Garden.

The box was one of the best in the house, and very near the stage. Vansittart felt assured that Lisa would recognize his wife and would see him standing behind her chair; and with a young woman of Lisa's temperament he knew not what form that recognition might assume.

Fortunately Lisa had now become too much of an artist to do anything which would take her "out of the picture." She gave Vansittart one little look which told him he was seen in the shadow where he stood; and for the rest she was no longer Lisa, the Venetian, but Haroun's devoted slave-girl, bought from a cruel master, during one of Haroun's nocturnal explorations of the city, and following him ever after with a devoted love, watchful, ubiquitous, his guardian angel in every danger, his resource and protection in every serio-comic dilemma. Her singing, her acting, were alike instinct with passion and genius, a genius unspoiled by the refinement of that higher culture which is too apt to bring self-consciousness and sickly self-torment in its train, and so to miss all broad and spontaneous effects. Fiordelisa flung her-



self into her *rôle* with a daring energy which always hit the mark.

Mr. Sefton was in the stalls, attentive, but not applauding. He left all noisy demonstration to the British public. It was enough for him to know that Lisa liked to see him there, tranquil and interested. The highest reward she had ever given him for all his devotion was the confession that she missed him when he was absent, and found something wanting in her audience when his stall was empty. For the most part he went as regularly to hear Lisa sing as he took his coffee after dinner. The dinner-party must be something very much out of the common run of dinners which could draw him from his place at the Apollo; and people remarked that for the last two seasons Mr. Sefton was seldom to be met in society until late in the evening.

He went to Mrs. Vansittart's box between the acts, and made himself particularly agreeable to Sophy, whom he had not seen since her sister's marriage.

"This is your first season, ain't it, Miss Marchant?" he said. "What a large reserve fund of enjoyment you must have to spend!"

Sophy was not going to accept compliments upon her ignorance.

"Fernhurst is so near town," she said. "One sees everybody, and one breathes the town atmosphere."

"Ah, but you only see people on their rustic side. They wear tailor gowns and talk about fox-hunting and sick cottagers. They leave their London intellect in Mayfair, like the table-knives rolled up in mutton fat, to come out sharp and bright next season. You don't



know what we are like in town if you see us only in the country."

"I don't find a remarkable difference in *you*," said Sophy, pertly. "You always try to be epigrammatic."

"Oh, I am no one—a poor follower of the fashion of the hour, whatever it may be. How do you like the music?"

"For music to hear and forget I think it is absolutely delightful."

"There are some numbers which the piano-organs and the fashionable bands won't allow you to forget—Zuleika's song for instance, and the quartette."

"I rather hate all but classical music," replied Sophy, with her fine air, "and I find your famous Signora Vivanti odiously vulgar."

"Deliciously vulgar, you should have said. Her vulgarity is one of her attractions. To be so pretty, and so graceful, and so clever, and at the same time a peasant to the tips of her fingers—there is the charm."

"I hate peasants, even when they are as clever as Thomas Carlyle."

Sefton looked at the pert little face meditatively. She was like Eve, but without Eve's exceptional loveliness—the loveliness that consists chiefly in delicacy and refinement, an ethereal beauty which makes a woman like a flower. She had Eve's transparent complexion and vivid changeful colouring, and her dark grey eyes had something of Eve's brilliancy. There was the same type, but less beautifully developed. She was quite pretty enough for Sefton to find amusement in teasing her, although all his stronger feelings were given to Signora Vivanti. He called in Charles Street on the



following afternoon. It was Mrs. Vansittart's afternoon at home; and on that day she could not shut her door even against her worst enemy.

Sefton found the usual feminine gossips—mothers and daughters, maiden aunts and cousins from the country, with fresh-coloured cheeks, and unremarkable faces—the usual sprinkling of well-dressed young men. Among so many people he could secure a few confidential words with Eve, while she poured out the tea, a duty she always performed with her own hands. It was the one thing that reminded her of the old life at Fernhurst, and those jovial teas which had stood in the place of dinner.

She spoke frankly enough of the performance at the Apollo, praised the music and the libretto, declared she had enjoyed it more than any serio-comic opera she had heard during the season; yet Sefton detected a certain constraint when she spoke of Signora Vivanti, which told him that the meeting of the two boats was not forgotten, and that the little scene had left almost as angry a spot upon her memory as that which burnt in his.

"And had you really never seen her on the stage before last night?" he asked.

"Never!"

"How very odd. I think you and Vansittart must have been about the only people at the West End who have not seen *Haroun Alraschid*—and yet you are playgoers."

"I was saving the Apollo for my sister," she answered, perfectly understanding his drift.

She knew that he was trying to give her pain, that he wanted to make her distrust her husband. Lisa's



conduct had impressed him as it had impressed her, and now he was gloating over her jealous agony.

She turned from him to talk to an aristocratic matron, a large and grand-looking woman, who would have looked better in peplum and chiton than in a flimsy pongee silk garment which she called her "frock." The matron had heard the word Apollo, and had a good deal to say about Signora Vivanti, whose performance she deprecated as too realistic.

"Dramatic passion is all very well in a classic opera like Gluck's *Orphée*," she said authoritatively, "but that mixture of passion with broad comedy is too bizarre for my taste."

"My dear Lady Oriphane, that is just what we want nowadays. We all languish for the bizarre. If we travel we want Africa and pigmy blackamoors. If we go to the play we want to be startled by the outrageous, rather than awed by the sublime. The stories we read must have some strange background, or be dotted about with unknown tongues. An author can interest us in a footman if he will only call him a Kitmutghar. With us the worship of the bizarre marks the highest point of culture."

Mr. Tivett was there, and chimed in at this stage of the conversation with his pretty little lady-like voice.

"It all means the same thing," he said; "Neo-paganism. We are the children of a decadent age. We have come to the top of the ladder of life—life meaning civilization and culture—and there is nothing left for us but to climb down again. All the strongest spirits are harking back to the uncivilized. That is at the bottom of the strong man's passion for Africa. The strong men



will all go to Africa, and in a few generations Europe will be peopled by weaklings and hereditary imbeciles. Then the strong men will come back and pour themselves over the civilized world, as the Vandals poured themselves over Italy, and London and Paris will be the spoil of the Anglo-African."

"Why not the Dutch-African, or the Portuguese-African?" asked Sefton, when everybody had laughed at little Mr. Tivett's gloomy out-look.

"Oh, the Anglo-Saxon race will prevail on the Dark Continent, just as they have prevailed in the East. Our future kings will style themselves Emperor of India and Africa. No other race can stand against us in the game of colonization. We have the dull, dogged courage which conquers the world."

Mr. Tivett was not allowed to indulge in any further prophecies, for Sophy absorbed him in a discussion about the plays she ought to see, and the music she ought to hear while she was in town.

"You are too late for Sarasate," he said tragically. "Last Saturday was his final performance. He leaves us in the flood-tide of the season, leaves us lamenting. But there are plenty of good things left. Clifford Harrison gives some of his delicious recitations next Saturday. Be sure you hear him. Hollman and Wolff are to be heard almost daily. And then there is the opera three nights a week. I hope you have no horrid dinner-parties to prevent your enjoying yourself."

"Only one this week, I am thankful to say," said Sophy, who was dying to see what London dinners were like, and was deeply grateful to that one generous hostess who, hearing of her expected visit, had sent her a



card for the stately feast to which the Vansittarts were bidden.

Eve had refused other dinner invitations during her sister's visit. She made all engagements subservient to Sophy's pleasure. Vansittart was not rich enough to give his wife an opera-box for the season, but he had taken a box for four evenings in the fortnight that Sophy was to spend in Charles Street, and four operas, with different sets of artists, for a young woman who had never heard an opera in her life, was an almost overpowering prospect. It needed all Sophy's aplomb to talk of operas of which she only knew the overtures, and an occasional hackneyed scena, as if every note of them were familiar to her; but Sophy was equal to the occasion, and discussed the merits and demerits of sopranos and tenors and baritones with as critical an air as if her opinions were the growth of years of experience, rather than the result of a careful study of *Truth* and *The World*, sent her regularly by Eve, so soon as they had been read in Charles Street.

Sefton joined in the conversation between Sophy and Mr. Tivett, and had a good deal of advice to offer as to the things that were worthy of the young lady's attention; the result of which advice appeared to be that there was really very little to be heard worth hearing, or to be seen worth seeing.

While tea and gossip occupied Eve and her friends in Charles Street, Vansittart had taken advantage of his wife's "afternoon," an occasion which he rarely honoured with his presence, and had driven to Chelsea Embankment to see Lisa and her aunt, and to impart that



warning which he had resolved upon giving, at any hazard to himself. It was dangerous perhaps, in his position, to renew any relations with the Venetian; yet on the other hand it might be needful to assure himself of her loyalty, now that she had been brought suddenly into the foreground of his life, and might, at any hour, reveal his fatal secret to her from whom he would have it for ever hidden.

All things considered, after two days and nights of anxious thought, it seemed to him best, for his own sake, as well as for Lisa's, that he should have some serious talk with her.

He heard the prattle of the child as la Zia opened the door to him, and the mother's voice telling him to be quiet. La Zia received him with open arms, and praised his kindness in coming to see them after such a long absence.

"If it had not been for the discovery that the rent was paid when we took our money to the agent on Our Lady's Day, we should have thought you had forgotten us," said la Zia.

She had her bonnet on, ready to take Paolo to Battersea Park, where she took him nearly every afternoon, while Lisa practised, or slept, or yawned over an English story-book. She would read nothing but English, in her determination to master that language; but history was too dull, novels were too long, and she cared only for short stories in which there was much sentimental love-making, generally by lords and ladies with high-sounding titles. These she read with rapture, picturing herself as the heroine, Vansittart as the high-born lover. She could not understand how so grand a gentle-



man could have missed a title. In Italy he would have been a Marquis or a Prince, she told herself.

She started up at the sound of his voice, and welcomed him joyously, pale but radiant.

"Why would you not come near me the other night?" she asked. "I was in your sister's house—Mr. Sefton told me that the gracious lady is your sister—and you were there, and you hid yourself from me."

"I was afraid, Si'ora," he answered, coming to the point at once. "You know what lies between you and me—a secret the telling of which would blight my life—and you are so reckless, so impulsive. How could I tell what you might say?"

She looked at him with mournful reproachfulness.

"Do you know me so little as that?" she said. "Don't you know that I would cut my tongue out—that I would die on the rack, as tortured prisoners died in Venice hundreds of years ago—rather than I would speak one word that could hurt you?"

"Forgive me, Si'ora. Yes, yes, I know that you would not willingly injure me—but you might ruin my life by a careless speech—kill my happiness without a thought of doing me harm. You have aroused my wife's suspicions already—suspicions of she knows not what—vague jealousies that have made her unhappy. She could not understand your impulsive greeting, from one whom I represented as almost a stranger. I could not tell her how much you were my friend, without telling her the why and the wherefore. I am hemmed round with difficulty when I am questioned about you. If you were old and ugly it would be different—but I dare not avow my interest in a young and beautiful woman without revealing the



claim she has upon my friendship—and in that claim lies the secret of my crime. Do you understand, Lisa?"

"Yes, I understand," she answered moodily.

Her aunt lingered on the threshold of the door, the boy tugging at her skirts, and urging her to go out. Battersea Park was his favourite play-ground. He carried a wooden horse with a fine development of head, but with only a stick and a wheel to represent his body, which equine compromise he bestrode and galloped upon in the course of his airing. La Zia carried his pail and shovel, with which he scraped up the loose gravel in the roadway as blissfully as if he had been disporting himself beside the waves that roll gaily in to threaten the children at play on the sands.

La Zia looked at her niece interrogatively, and the niece nodded "go," whereon aunt and boy vanished. She was always bidden to stop when Sefton was the visitor.

"You need not be frightened," said Lisa. "We are not likely to meet again, as we met on the river. It was so long since I had seen you! I was taken by surprise, and forgot everything except that it was you, whom I thought I should never see again. I shall be wiser in future, now that I know more about you, and now that I have seen your wife."

"That is my own good Lisa! She is a sweet wife, is she not? Worthy that a man should love her?"

"Yes, she is worthy; and she is fair and beautiful, like the Mary-lilies. I don't wonder that you love her. And she has never done any evil thing in her life, has she? If a young man had said to her, 'Come with me to Venice, and be my little wife,' she would not have



believed him, as I did. She would have said, 'You must marry me first in the church.' She would have believed in nothing but the church and the priest. She was not ignorant and poor, like me."

"Lisa, do you suppose that I was making any unkind comparisons? I said only that she is worthy to be loved—that all men and women must love and honour her, and that her husband must needs adore her. And now, Si'ora, promise me that you will respect her jealousy, which is only the shadow cast by her love, and that you will do or say nothing that can make her unhappy."

"I will do or say nothing to hurt you," Lisa answered, somewhat sullenly. "She has little need to be unhappy, having all your love. But she is very sweet, as you say. She spoke to me graciously the other night, although she had a curious look, as if she were half afraid of me. Yes, she is very beautiful. Did you know her and love her long before that day on the Lido, when you were so friendly with my aunt and me?"

"No, Si'ora."

"What! your heart was free then?"

"Free as air."

"And afterwards—when I saw you at the opera? When you came to our lodgings?"

"Ah, then I had seen her, I was captive. I loved her at first sight, but went about foolishly hiding my chains, trying not to love her. And now that we understand each other fully upon one point—now that I can trust my secret and my happiness in your hands, I want to talk to you about yourself, Lisa. I am not over-fond of that Mr. Sefton with whom you are so friendly."

"No more am I over-fond of him. He is kind to



us. He brings toys for Paolo; and he takes us on the river. He is the only friend little Zinco has allowed me to have."

"He gives Paolo toys? And he gave you that diamond necklace, did he not?"

"Gave me my necklace! I should think not! Do you suppose I would be beholden to him, or to any one? Do you know how many bracelets and brooches I have sent back to the fools who bought them for me? Diamonds, emeralds, rubies, sapphires—all the colours of the rainbow. I just look at them and laugh, and carry them off to little Zinco, and he packs them up and sends them back to the giver, with his compliments, and his assurance that Signora Vivanti is not in the habit of accepting such gifts. Mr. Sefton give me my necklace! Why, my necklace is my fortune!"

And then she told him how she and la Zia had scraped and saved, and lived upon pasta and Swiss cheese, in order to buy that necklace from Mr. Attenborough, who had let her have it a wonderful bargain, and let her pay a considerable part of the price by weekly instalments. It was a bankrupt Contessa's necklace—a Contessa who had run away from her husband.

"I am very glad to hear that," said Vansittart. "I was afraid all was not well when I saw my little Si'ora blazing in diamonds."

"Did they blaze?" she cried, delighted. "You thought that I was like some of the singers who spend all their salary on a carriage, and grand dinners, and fine silk gowns—a hundred pounds for a single gown! I wanted to buy something that would last, something that I could turn into money whenever I liked."



"But your diamonds yield no interest, Si'ora, so they are hardly a wise investment."

"I don't want interest; I want something that is pretty to look at. Did my diamonds blaze? Your sister's is the only grand house I have sung at. I sing at Mrs. Hawberk's parties, but her house is not grand, and I take no money for singing at her parties. But I had ten pounds for singing at Lady Hartley's—ten pounds for two little songs."

"Bravissima, Si'ora! There are plenty of drawing-rooms in London where you may pick up gold and silver. There is a freshness about you and your singing that people will like, as a pleasant relief, after a grand opera. But now, Cara, I would earnestly warn you to have very little to do with Mr. Sefton, to keep him at the furthest possible distance. Believe me, he is a dangerous acquaintance."

"Not to me," said Lisa, snapping her fingers. "He is nothing to me, niente, niente, niente! My heart has never beat any faster for his coming. I am never sorry when he goes. He is kind to Paolo, and my aunt thinks him a delightful gentleman. He tells us stories about the lords and ladies he knows, and helps me with my English. He makes me read to him. He tells me the meaning of words, and teaches me how to pronounce them. I should not have got on nearly so fast without his help."

"Dangerous help, Si'ora. You are encouraging a traitor. Be sure his kindness springs from no good motive. He doesn't want to marry you."

"Do you think I want him for a husband?" exclaimed Lisa, with supreme contempt. "I shall never



marry. No one will ever have the right to question me about Paolo's father."

There was a dignity in this assertion which showed that the unsophisticated daughter of the Isles had made some progress in social science. She knew at least that a husband was a person who might call her to account for her past life.

"I tell you that I don't care for Mr. Sefton; but he amuses us, la Zia and me, and our lives would be very dull without him."

"Better dulness than danger or disgrace. The man is bad, Lisa, bad to the core. Some men are made so. In the county where he was born, among the neighbours who respected his father and mother, and who most of them tolerate him for his name's sake, he is neither trusted nor liked. Before he left the University, when he had only just come of age, there was a village tragedy in which he was known to be implicated, a tenant-farmer's pretty daughter drowned in the mill-dam with her nameless child. The girl's father was a tenant on Sefton's family estate, as his father and grandfather had been before him. A connection of that kind with most young men would be sacred, almost like the sanctity of kindred—but Wilfred Sefton had no compunction. He was saved from exposure, for the love that the sufferers bore to his people; but the scandal became pretty well known in the neighbourhood, and the friends of his family who might have pitied him for the awful consequences of his sin, were disgusted by the indifference with which he treated the tragedy—living it down with a brazen front, and later, when he was owner of the estate, turning out the girl's father



with a most deliberate heartlessness. Do you think such a man as that is worthy of your friendship, Lisa, worthy to be admitted to the home of an unprotected woman on a footing of familiarity?"

"No, no, he is not worthy. If you tell me to shut my door against him the door shall be shut. But is it true? Did this poor girl really drown herself because she could not bear to live disgraced? Are there women in England like that?"

"Yes, Lisa. There have been many such women. This girl belonged to the yeoman class—her forefathers had been settled in the land for two hundred years, genuine sons of the soil, respected by their neighbours, and as proud of their good name as if it had been a patent of nobility; and this girl was young and sensitive. I have heard her story from those who saw her grow up from infancy to childhood—gentle, yielding, guileless—an easy prey for an unscrupulous young man with a handsome face and a winning manner. He won her, blighted her, murdered her. Yes, Lisa, his crime came nearer murder than that dagger-thrust at Florian's."

"Don't speak of that," she cried, putting her fingers on his lips. "We must forget it. There never was such a thing—or at least you had nothing to do with it. It was Fate, not your will, that he should die like that. It was to be. *Non si muove foglia che Iddio non voglia*. I am glad you have told me about that girl. I never liked Mr. Sefton—never really liked him. However pleasant he was I had always a feeling that he was hiding something. There is a light in his eyes as if he were laughing at one. He is like Mephistopheles in the opera. It is not in his nature to be sorry for any one."



"And you will give him his *congé*?"

"Yes; he shall come here no more. I shall not let him know that you have told me that poor girl's story. He might want to fight a duel with you, if he knew what you have said of him."

"I don't think he would, Lisa; but it is wiser to tell him nothing. You can say you have been told you are compromising yourself by receiving his visits."

"Little Zinco does not love him," said Lisa; "he will be pleased to see him dismissed. He says I should have no friend but him and my piano."

"Zinco is a worthy soul."

"Is he not? He pretends to be very proud of my success. For the first year of my engagement at the Apollo I used to give him a quarter of my salary; but now I only pay him for my lessons. He goes on teaching me grand opera. It broadens and refines my style, he tells me—but Mr. Hawberk implores me never to leave off being vulgar. It would be my ruin, he says."

"Be yourself, Lisa—bright, candid, and original. Your transparent nature will always pass for genius, from its rarity. And now good-bye. I must not come here any more. I came to-day because I felt I had a duty to do as your friend, but my wife would not like to hear of me as your visitor. We love each other too well not to be easily jealous."

"It has been sweet to see you," answered Lisa, gravely, "but I will not ask you to come again. Yes, yes," she added musingly. "I understand! Love is always jealous."

She gave him her hand, and bade him good-bye, with a gentle resignation which touched him more deeply



than her impulsive moods had ever done. The beautiful dark eyes looked into his, and said, "I love you still—shall love you always," in language which a man need not be a coxcomb to understand. And so they parted, each believing that it might be a final parting.

Vansittart looked at his watch as he ran down-stairs. It was nearly six o'clock. At the bottom of the last flight he met Sefton, who was entering with an easy air and self-satisfied smile, which changed to a frown as he recognized Lisa's departing visitor.

"I have just come from Charles Street," he said, recovering himself instantly, "where I expected to find you. But I dare say you have been more amused here than you would have been there. The narrow footpaths and shady woodland walks are generally pleasanter than the broad high-road."

"Is that a truism, or an allegory? If the latter, it bears no application to my visit here."

"Doesn't it really? You don't mean that you, Mrs. Vansittart's husband, call upon Signora Vivanti in the beaten way of friendship?"

"In friendship, at least, if not in the beaten way; but whatever my motive in visiting that lady, I don't admit your right to question me about it; or"—with a laugh—"to resort to allegory. Good day to you."

He ran down the steps to his hansom, and Sefton went slowly up the three flights of stone stairs which led to Signora Vivanti's bower, brooding angrily upon his encounter with Vansittart. He had never been able to extort any admissions from Lisa about this man. She had been secret as the grave; yet he was convinced that her past history was the history of an intrigue with



Vansittart; and after that effusive greeting from the boat, and remembering the expression of her face more than two years ago, as she hung upon his arm on the Embankment, he was convinced that she loved him still, and that this passion for another was the cause of her coldness to a more eligible admirer.

## CHAPTER IX.

"AND EVERY GENTLE PASSION SICK TO DEATH."

ALTHOUGH in his leisurely ascent to the third story Mr. Sefton had time to recover the appearance of serenity, he was by no means master of himself as he waited for Lisa's door to be opened. Still less was he master of himself when the door was opened by Lisa herself, looking flushed and excited, with eyes that were brilliant with newly shed tears.

He went through the little vestibule and into the sunlit drawing-room with the air of a man who had the right to enter unbidden, and flung himself suddenly into one of Lisa's basket chairs, which creaked under his weight.

"It is very late," said Lisa, evidently fluttered and uneasy. "I was just going to put on my hat to go to the theatre."

"You needn't hurry," Sefton answered coolly. "It isn't six o'clock; and you don't come on the stage till half-past eight. You'd better sit down and take things easily. You don't look much like going into the street, with that crying face. You'd better get over your scene with your lover before you go out of doors."



"I have no lover," Lisa answered indignantly, tossing up her head.

In Sefton's eyes she had never looked lovelier than at that moment; every feature instinct with passion; red lips and delicate nostrils faintly quivering; a rich carmine glowing beneath the pale olive of her cheeks; the great dark eyes brightened by tears; the haughty pose of the head giving something of patrician dignity to that uncultured beauty. He was passionately in love with her, loving her with a passion which had strengthened with every hour spent in her company, which every token of her cold indifference had stimulated to increasing warmth. He loved her first because she was lovely and fascinating in her childish simplicity. He loved her next and best because she, who by every common rule of life should have been so easily won, had proved invincible. The greatest princess in the land—the woman most hedged round by conventionalities—could not have held herself more aloof than Lisa had done, even while condescending to accept his friendship. She had held herself aloof; and she had shown him that she was not afraid of him.

He saw her now under a new aspect, saw her deeply moved, with all the potentialities of tragedy in those tremulous lips and shining eyes. He saw now in all its reality the passion which informed her acting, and gave pathetic reality to all that there was of sentiment in her *rôle*. He saw the moving spring which had made it so easy for her to fling herself into the stage personality, to represent in all its touching details the passion of hopeless love.

"You have no lover? You are an audacious woman



to make that assertion to me when I have seen you in his company, after an interval of years, and when each time I saw you, your face has been a declaration of love. I met the man on your staircase just now; and I can read the history of his visit in your eyes. Do you mean to tell me that he is anything less than your lover?"

"I mean to tell you nothing. *Che diavolo!* You have no right to ask me any questions. What are you to me that you should call me to account? Signor Zinco said I was very foolish to let you come here. It was only because my aunt and the boy like you that I have let you come. And you took us on the river, which was pleasant. One must have some one."

"You will have me no more until we understand each other," cried Sefton, furiously. "*Voglio finirla.* I will not be fooled. I will not be duped. I will not be your abject slave as I have been, going night after night to feast upon your beauty, to drink the music of your voice, giving you my whole mind and heart, and getting nothing for my pains, not even the assurance that you are growing fonder of me, that love will come in good time. Do you think I am the man to endure that sort of torture for ever?"

"I do not think at all about you. *Voglio finirla, io!* I have made up my mind that it will be better for you not to come here any more. We shall miss you and your clever talk, and the days on the river—but we can live without you—and as for love, that is over and done with. I shall never love anybody but Paolo and la Zia. I have cared for two people in this world—and my love ended badly with both. The one who loved me died.



The one I loved the most never loved me. There, you have my confession without questioning. Are you satisfied now?"

"Not quite. The man you love is the man who left you just now—Paolo's father?"

He came nearer to her as he asked this daring question; the question he had been longing to ask from the beginning of things. He took hold of her arm almost roughly, and drew her towards him, scrutinizing her face, and trying to read her secret in her eyes.

She answered him with a mocking laugh.

"You are very clever at guessing riddles," she said. "I have made my confession. You will get no more out of me. And now, with your permission, I will put on my hat. It takes me a long time to get to the theatre—I always go by the steamboat on fine evenings—and it takes me a still longer time to dress for the stage."

She went to the door and opened it for him, waiting with a courteous air for him to go out; but he took hold of her again, even more roughly than before, shut the door violently, and drew her back into the room.

"There is time enough for you to talk to me," he said. "I will answer for your being at the theatre in good time—but you must, and shall, hear me out. We must have an explanation. I never knew how fond I was of you till just now, when I met that man leaving your house. I was satisfied to go dangling on—playing at a love affair—so long as I was the only one. But now that he is hanging about you, there must be no more uncertainty. I must know my fate. Lisa, you know how I love you. There is no use in talking of



that. If I were to talk for an hour I could say no more than every word I have spoken for the last year and a half—ever since we sat together in the tent that Sunday night at Hawberk's—has been telling you. I love you. I love you, Lisa: with a love that fuses my life into yours, which makes life useless, purposeless, hopeless without you."

He was holding her still, that strong, sinewy hand of his grasping her firm, round arm, his other hand and arm drawing her against his heart. She could feel how furiously that heart was beating; she could see his finely cut face whitening as it looked into hers; his eyes with a wild light in them. He stood silent, holding her thus, like a bird caught in a springe, while she struggled to release herself from him. He stood thinking out his fate, with the woman he loved in his arms.

In those few moments he was asking himself the crucial question, Could he live without this woman? Passion—a passion of slow and silent growth—answered no. Then came another question, Would she be his mistress? Was it any use to sing the old song, to offer her the market price for her charms—a house at the West End, a carriage, a settlement; all except his name and the world's esteem? Common sense answered him sternly no. This woman, struggling to escape from an unwelcome caress, was not the woman to accept dishonourable proposals. She had been showing him for the last year and a half, in the plainest manner, that he was positively indifferent to her. She was no fonder of him now than at the very beginning of their acquaintance. Love could not tempt her. Wealth could hardly tempt her, since she could earn an income which was



more than sufficient for her needs. To such a woman as this, peasant-born as she was, uncultivated, friendless, he must offer the highest price—that price which he had told himself he would offer to no woman living. He must offer his name, and he must enter upon that solemn contract between man and woman which had always seemed to him an anomaly in the legislature of a civilized people—a contract which only death or dishonour could break.

“Lisa,” he said, “I am not the enemy you think me. There is no sacrifice I would not make to you. You know so little of the world that perhaps you hardly know how much a man of good family and estate sacrifices when he takes a wife who can bring him nothing but his heart’s desire. Try and understand that, Lisa. I love you too well to count the cost—too well to care that marriage with you cuts me off from all chance of marrying a woman whose money would quadruple my fortune and buy me a peerage. I could make such a marriage as that to-morrow if I chose, Lisa. It has been made very plain to me that I should be accepted by a lady who will carry a million sterling to the husband of her choice. Don’t think me a snob for telling you this. I want you to understand that I am worth something in the world’s market. Be my wife, Lisa. I am a rich man. I can take you to a fine old country house, as large as one of the palaces on the Canal Grande. I can give you all things women love—horses and carriages, fine rooms, pictures, silver, jewels—and I give you with them all the devotion of a man who has loved many women with a light and passing love, but who never knew what the reality of love meant till he knew



you, who never until now has asked a woman to be his wife."

He released her with those last words, and they stood looking at each other, she breathless with surprise.

"Do you really mean that?" she asked.

"Really, really, really. Say yes, Lisa. Kiss me, my beloved, kiss me the kiss of betrothal"—holding out his arms to her pleadingly. "We can be married two or three days hence, before the registrar, and afterwards in any church you like. You will throw up your engagement at once. We will go to the Tyrol, bury ourselves in the hills and the woods, and in November I will take you home, and let all the county envy me my lovely wife."

"You would marry me—me, the lace-girl of Burano; common, oh, so common! And so poor; brought up among ragged children, earning seven soldi a day, living on polenta. You would marry Paolo's mother?"—a sudden crimson rushing over the pale olive of her cheeks.

"Yes, I would marry Paolo's mother, without even knowing the secret of Paolo's parentage. I would marry you because I love you, Lisa—madly, foolishly, obstinately, with a love that does not count the cost."

"And I should be a great lady? I should drive about in a grand carriage, and have footmen—powdered footmen like Lady Hartley's—to wait upon me?"

"Yes, child, yes—frivolous, foolish child. Come! Come to my heart, Lisa! Non posso stare senza te! Come to me, idolo mio, my love, my wife."

He would have taken her to his heart triumphantly, believing himself accepted, but she stretched out her



two hands with a repelling gesture as he approached her, and held him at arm's length.

"Not if you could make me a queen," she said. "You do not know Fiordelisa, when you try to tempt her with house and land. Your English ladies marry like that, I have heard, for houses and jewels and horses, to be called Principessa or Contessa—but I will never belong to a man I don't love. I have belonged to one man, and he was a hard master, and I felt like a slave with a chain. My life was not my own. I know what it is to belong to a man. It doesn't mean paradise. But I loved him dearly at the first, when he was kind to me, and took me away from my hard life. I loved him a little to the last even, though he was a hard master."

"I would never be hard with you, Lisa. I could never be your master. Love has made me your slave. Carissima mia, be not so foolish as to deny me. Think how gay, how luxurious, how happy your life may be."

He was pleading to her in her own dulcet language, the soft Italian, softened to even more liquid utterance by those elisions he had caught from her Venetian tongue.

She stood a few paces from him, her arms folded tightly across her breast, defying him. Marco, the cat, had awakened from his long afternoon sleep in a luxurious basket—Sefton's offering—and was arching his back and rubbing his soft white fur against his mistress's black gown. She looked like a witch, Sefton thought, standing there in her defiant beauty, shabbily clad in rusty black, and with the white cat protecting her, glaring and spitting at him in unreasoning anger.

"My life could never be happy with a man I did not love," she said resolutely. "Even if I believed in



your promises I would not marry you. I would not accept your generous sacrifice. But I don't believe in your grand offers. I have been warned. I know your character better than you think. You are trying to deceive me with promises that you don't mean to keep, as you deceived the farmer's daughter, who drowned herself because of your lies."

"Ah!" he cried furiously. "You have heard that village slander. It could only reach you from one source—the lips of the man who left you just now. Don't you know that when a poor man's daughter goes wrong it is always the richest man in the neighbourhood who is accused of seducing her? I dare say that rule holds good in Italy as well as in England. I am in earnest, Lisa. I mean no less than I say. Meet me next Monday at the registrar's office, with your aunt, and with Signor Zinco if you like, to see that the marriage is a good marriage, and we will leave that office as man and wife."

"No," she answered doggedly. "Even if you are in earnest it can make no difference to me. I don't want to be a great lady. People would laugh at me, and I should be miserable. You wouldn't like la Zia to live in your fine house, would you now?"

"We could make her happy in a house of her own, or send her back to Venice with a comfortable income."

"Just so. You would want to get rid of la Zia. That would not do for me. She and I have never been parted. And Paolo; you would marry Paolo's mother; but you would want to send him back to Venice with la Zia, I dare say."



"It would be the simplest way of solving a difficulty; but if he were necessary to your happiness he should stay with us, Lisa. I would do anything to make you happy."

She looked at him with a touch of sadness, and shook her head.

"You are a generous lover," she said, "if you really mean what you say; but it is all useless. You could not make me happy; and I could not make you happy. You would very soon be sorry for your sacrifice. You would regret the English lady and her million. I am content as I am—content if not happy. I have as much money as I want, and this room is fine enough for me. If you saw the hovel in which I was reared you would think me a lucky woman to have such a beautiful home. In ten years I shall have saved a fortune, and *la Zia* and I can go back to Venice and live like ladies on the Canal Grande; or I can go on singing if I'm not tired, and then I shall grow richer every day."

"Lisa, Lisa, how cold and how cruel you are—cruel to a poor wretch who adores you. To me you are ice, but to Vansittart you are fire. Your face lighted, your whole being awoke to new life, at sight of him."

Lisa shrugged her shoulders, irritated by his persistency, and provoked into candour.

"Suppose I like him and don't like you, can I help it? God has made me so," she said carelessly. "Ah, here is *la Zia*—*la Zia* whom you would banish," she cried, clapping her hands as a key turned in the vestibule door.

"It looked like rain," said *la Zia*, as she came in, "so Paolo and I made haste home."



Lisa caught the boy up in her arms, and kissed him passionately. Never had she felt so glad to see him. Her active imagination had pictured herself separated for ever from her son, living in an atmosphere of pomp and powdered footmen, forbidden even to remember her fatherless boy.

He had thriven on English fare, and the mild breezes of Battersea Park, and frequent airings upon the Citizen steamers. He was a great lump of a boy, with large black eyes, and long brown hair, and his mother's warm olive colouring. The only traces of the other parentage were in the square Saxon brow and the firm aquiline of the nose. He was a magnificent outcome of a mixed race, and a fine example of what a boy of four years old ought to be. Lisa dropped into a chair with her burden, still hugging him, but borne down by his weight.

"Santo e santissimo!" exclaimed la Zia. "You will be late at the theatre. You must take a cab, quanto che costa."

The Venetians had a great horror of cabs, which were not alone costly, but fraught with the hazard of vituperation from fiery-faced cabmen. They delighted in the penny distances of road cars and other public conveyances. To exceed the limit of a penny ride was to la Zia's mind culpable extravagance. A cab was a vehicle only to be thought of in emergencies.

"Pardon, Signor," she said, "the pleasure of your most desired company has made my niece forget her duties."

She bustled into the adjoining room, and returned with Lisa's black lace hat and little merino cape. There



was no chorus girl at the Apollo who dressed as shabbily as the Venetian prima donna. La Zia bundled on the hat and tied on the cape, and dismissed her niece with a kiss.

"Zinco will bring you home, as always," she said.

The 'cello lived in a shabby old street hard by, and was Lisa's nightly escort from the Apollo to Chelsea. On fine nights they walked all the way, hugging the river, and praising the Embankment, which Zinco declared to be as much finer than the Lung 'Arno, as London was in his opinion superior to Florence.

Lisa and Sefton went down-stairs together, both silent. He hailed a crawling hansom a few paces from the house-door, and put her into it, without a word. When she was seated he lifted his hat, and bade her good night; and it seemed to her that there was deadly hatred in the face which had looked at her a little while ago transfigured by passionate love.

Hatred of some one; herself, perhaps; or it might be of a fancied rival. Her heart thrilled with fear as she thought of Vansittart. Unreasoning jealousy on her account had cost one man his life, and had burdened the life of another man with inextinguishable remorse. Would Sefton, whose love expressed itself with appalling vehemence, try to injure the one man she cared for, the man for whose sake she would freely give her own life? It would be well to warn him, perhaps. To warn him? But how? She did not even know where he lived; but she knew his sister's house, and his sister's servants would be able to tell her his address. She knew his real name now—Vansittart, a grandly sounding name. She repeated it to herself with a kind of rapture as the



cab rattled along the King's Road, taking her to the Apollo.

She wrote a long letter to Vansittart next day, telling him that Sefton had offered to marry her, and that she had refused him.

"He is jealous and angry about you," she told him, in conclusion. "He fancies because I was so pleased to see you that day on the river that it is my love for you that made me refuse him, and I think he would like to kill you. His face looked like murder as he bade me good-bye—and I'm afraid it is you he wants to murder, not me. Pray be on your guard about him. He may hire some one to stab you in the street, after dark. Please don't go out at night except in your carriage. Forgive me for writing to you; but when I think that your life may be in danger, I cannot refrain from sending you this warning. You warned me of my danger, which was no danger, because I never cared for the man. I warn you of yours."

With this letter in her pocket, Lisa put herself into one of her favourite omnibuses, which took her to Albert Gate, and from Albert Gate she found her way across the Park to Hill Street. She remembered the number, though she would hardly have known the house in its morning brightness of yellow marguerites and pale blue silk blinds.

The haughtiest of footmen opened the door, and looked at her from head to foot with the deliberate eye of scorn. Her beauty made not the faintest impression upon his rhinoceros hide. She was on foot, and shabbily clad, and he took her for a work-girl.



"I have a letter for Mr. Vansittart," she began timidly.

The footman interrupted her with stern decisiveness. "This is not Mr. Vansittart's 'ouse. This is Lady 'Artley's."

"I want to know where Mr. Vansittart lives."

"Charles Street. Number 99a."

"Please tell me the way."

The youth came out on to the doorstep, moving with the languid hauteur which befitted one whose noble height and well-grown legs gave him first rank in the army of London footmen. He was not ill-natured, but he took what he called a proper pride in himself, conscious that his livery was made by one of the most expensive tailors in the West End, and that his shoes came from Bond Street.

Lifting his arm with a haughty grace, he indicated the side street which would be Lisa's nearest way to Charles Street.

She thanked him and tripped lightly away, he watching her with a languid gaze, too obtuse to recognize the brilliant Venetian prima donna—whose eyes, and shoulders, and diamonds he had approved the other night, when he hung over her with peaches and champagne—in the foreign-looking young woman in rusty black.

Lisa found 99a, again a house with flowers in all the windows, and dainty silken blinds—a house of brighter and fresher aspect than the houses of Venice, where the effects of form and colour are broader, bolder, and more paintable, but lack that finish and neatness which distinguish a well-kept house at the West End of



London: a house where no expenditure is spared in the struggle between the love of beauty and colour, and the curse of coal fires and gloomy skies. Another footman looked at Lisa with the cold eye of indifference, less haughty than Lady Hartley's superb menial only because Vansittart's smaller means did not afford prize specimens of the footman genus. Eve and her husband had to be content with second best in the shape of a country-bred youth of five foot ten, neatly clad in a sober livery, and wearing shoes made at Liss. It had been the Vansittart habit to employ local tradesmen wherever it was possible.

"Any answer?" asked the youth, as Lisa delivered her letter.

No, there was no answer required—but would he be sure to give the letter to Mr. Vansittart?

There was a rustle of silken skirts on the stairs as she spoke, and two ladies came tripping down, talking as they came.

"The carriage is not there yet," cried Sophy, glancing at the open doorway. "I'm afraid we shall be late for luncheon."

Eve followed her, and was in the hall in time to see Lisa as she turned from the door—to see her and to recognize her as the woman who had brought perplexity and apprehension into the clear heaven of her life.

The carriage came to the door—a light victoria, with a fine single horse. The footman stood with the door open, ready to hand his mistress to her carriage and to take his place beside the coachman.

"What did that person want?" asked Eve, sharply.

"She brought a letter for my master, ma'am."



"Where is it? Give it to me."

She took the letter, and looked at it as if her sight could pierce the envelope.

"Mr. Vansettart!" The woman could not even spell his name, and yet was able to darken his wife's existence.

"What a shabby letter!" cried Sophy, struggling with the top button of a very tight glove. "It must be a begging letter, I should think. But what a pretty dark-eyed woman that was. I seem to remember her face. Really, really, Eve, we shall be late! Mrs. Montford told us her luncheons are always punctual. She wouldn't wait for a Bishop."

Eve was staring at the letter. Vansittart was out, or she would have gone to him with it. She wanted to put it into his hands, and to see how he took its contents; but she did not even venture to keep the letter in her possession till they met. She ran into her husband's study, and put the odious letter on the mantelpiece, in a spot where he might possibly overlook it. If it were overlooked until the afternoon she might be with him when he opened it.

She went into society with her heart aching. Whatever her husband's feelings might be, this shameless Italian was running after him. What insolence! What consummate audacity! To come to his house, to pursue him with letters, even in his wife's presence! And Sefton had introduced this brazen creature to her; and she—Vansittart's wife—had been weak enough to be civil to her.

Sophy's perpetual prattle agonized her all the way to Grosvenor Gardens; nor was the smart luncheon which awaited them there less agonizing. She had to



brace herself for the ordeal, to smile and talk, and laugh at good stories, pretending to see the point of them; laughing when other people laughed; pretending to enjoy that happy mixture of society to be met at some hospitable luncheon tables—a dash of literature and art, a fashionable priest and a fashionable actor, an archæological Dean from a grave old Midland city, a young married beauty, a Primrose League enthusiast, a foreign diplomatist, and a sporting peer owning a handsome slice of the shires.

Mr. Sefton came in after they were seated, and dropped into the one vacant chair beside Sophy.

"You are always late," Mrs. Montford said reproachfully. "I suppose that is because you are the idlest man I know."

He was a favourite of Mrs. Montford's—*l'ami de la maison*—and allowed to come and go as he pleased. When he gave a tea-party it was generally Mrs. Montford who invited half the company, helped him to choose the flowers and to receive the guests.

"You have hit the mark," he said. "A man who has no specific occupation never has time to be punctual. Nobody respects him. He can't look at his watch in the middle of a friend's prosing and pretend important business. I think I shall article myself to a civil engineer; and then when people are boring I can say I am waited for about the caissons for the new bridge. What bridge? My dear fellow, no time to explain! One springs into a hansom, and is gone. Your idler can't extricate himself from the Arachnê web of boredom. His time is everybody's property."

"Elaborate, but not convincing," said Mrs. Mont-



ford, smiling at him, as he helped himself with a leisurely air to a cutlet en papillote. "I would wager all the gloves that I shall wear at Etretat that you were lying in your easiest chair, with your feet on that high fender of yours, reading Maupassant's new story."

"For once in your life you have succeeded as a reader of character—or no character. I was reading 'Le Pas Perdu.' Don't you see how red my eyelids are?"

"Exactly. You are the kind of man who can weep over a book and refuse a sovereign to a poor relation."

"That," said Sefton, "was almost unkind."

Sophy now claimed her right of being talked to.

"Why were you not at Lady Dalborough's last night?" she asked.

"My dear Miss Marchant, you can't expect to see me at all the stupidest parties in London."

"The party was rather dull," assented Sophy, who until this moment had thought it brilliant, "but there was some really good music."

"One can have that for dirty coin at the St. James's Hall. I adore Oscar de Lampion's love ditties, but not at the price of perspiring in a mob of second-best people."

"It was my fault that we went to Lady Dalborough's," said Sophy, remorsefully.

"Oh, I forgive anybody for going there—once. You will be wiser next year."

His eyes were on Eve on the other side of the table, while he talked with Sophy. She was very pale, and instead of the delicate blush rose of her complexion there were hectic spots under the eyes, which



accentuated her pallor. He who once cared for her almost to the point of passion, felt a thrill of pain at seeing in a face a hint of the consumptive tendency which he had heard of about Peggy. "Those girls are all consumptive," some village gossip had said to him, with the morbid relish of gloomy possibilities which is an outcome of village monotony. He was shocked to think that she, too, perhaps, was doomed; but the thought urged him to no pity for her husband—not even to that pity which would have prevented him striking at his enemy through her. The rage that burned within him knew no restraining power. If he had lived in the Middle Ages that rage would have meant murder—but bloodshed in the nineteenth century involves too many inconvenient possibilities to be thought of lightly by a man of landed estate. It means throwing up everything for the exquisite sensation of gratified revenge—melting all the pearls of life into one draught of passion's fiery wine.

"Why is not Vansittart with you?" he asked abruptly, still looking at Eve.

"He had business in the City this morning."

"Business—in the City? What could take Vansittart to the City? That seems quite out of his line."

"Yes, it does, don't it," said Sophy, impressed by the significance of his tone, which seemed to veil a deeper meaning. "What should a Hampshire squire have to do in the City?"

Sefton did not dwell upon the question. He saw that he had awakened vague suspicions in Sophy's mind, the first faint hint of a domestic mystery. He talked of other things—of people—lightly, delightfully, Sophy



thought. He told her of two marriages which had just occurred, on the very topmost heights of the fashionable mountain—took her behind the scenes, as it were, and introduced her to the inner life of the chief actors in those elegant ceremonials—the impecunious father of one bride selling his daughter to a man she hated, the angry mother of the bridegroom in the other marriage raging against the girl her son had chosen.

“You don’t know the bad blood which was hidden under those floral decorations and the Gunter buffet,” he said.

Sophy was charmed to hear about these smart people—charmed most of all at the idea that they were mostly miserable—that the women whose toilettes her soul sickened for often wore the hair-shirt of the penitent under a gown which Society papers extolled.

Sefton was very attentive to Sophy, albeit his furtive glances never abandoned their watch of the lovely face on the other side of the table. Poor Sophy thrilled at startling possibilities. He had admired Eve in the past, had seemed devoted almost to the point of proposing. And she, Sophy, had been assured she was growing daily more like Eve. More wonderful things had happened than that he should fall in love with her—the old fancy for Eve reviving for Eve’s younger sister. Now that the detrimental father had taken up his abode permanently on the Continent, his domestic responsibilities much lightened by Eve’s liberality to her sisters, there could be less objection to an alliance with the house of Marchant. Mr. Sefton was completely his own master, without a single relation near enough to interfere with his choice. He had lost Eve by his hesitancy



and hanging back. Might he not act more nobly in his dealings with Eve's sister? That low, thrilling note which he knew how to put into his voice, which was a mere mechanism of the man, touched Sophy's senses like exquisite music. Her eyelids sank, her cheek kindled, though he talked only of common things.

He had seen enough of Eve, while thus entertaining Sophy, to be assured that she had lately suffered some painful experience—a quarrel with Vansittart, perhaps. Or it might be that silent jealousy had been gnawing at her heart since that day on the river. No woman could see Lisa's behaviour and not be jealous. The husband would explain, no doubt, but explanations go for very little in such a case. They are accepted for the moment; wife and husband "kiss again with tears;" and the next morning at the breakfast-table the husband sees dark brooding looks, and knows that there is a scorpion coiled in his wife's heart. Her faith in him has been shaken. He may scotch the snake, but he cannot kill it.

Eve was glad when Mrs. Montford gave the signal for a move to the drawing-room. The men stayed behind to smoke, all but Sefton, who followed the ladies, a proceeding which Sophy ascribed to his interest in her conversation. At the luncheon-table Eve had been all talk and gaiety, deceiving every one except the man who watched her face in its occasional moments of repose. In the drawing-room she abandoned all effort, sank into a chair near the window, evidently sick at heart, glancing first at the clock on the chimney-piece and then at the street to see if her carriage were approaching. She



had ordered it for a quarter past three. She started up the instant it was announced, and went over to Mrs. Montford to make her adieux, that lady being deep in a murmured discussion of the latest Society scandal with a brace of matrons, all with their heads together, while Sophy was being taken round the rooms by Sefton, to look at the pictures and curios.

"You needn't have been in such a dreadful hurry to come away," remonstrated this young lady in a lugubrious tone, as they drove homeward. "Nobody else was moving."

"They will be gone in a quarter of an hour. Only the bores ever linger after a London luncheon. Everybody has something to do."

"We have nothing to do till five o'clock; unless you go to Lady Thornton's at home before five. The card says four till seven."

"Then we can go at six. That will be quite early enough."

"And what are we to do in the interval? It isn't half-past three yet."

"Rest, Sophy; sleep if you can. We are going to a theatre to-night, and a dance afterwards."

"It is so near the end of the season," sighed Sophy. "People are all talking of German Spas and of their cures. One feels quite out of it when one has no complaint to talk about."

Vansittart was at home. Eve went straight to his den, sure to find him there, smoking over a book or a newspaper.

He looked up at her smilingly, but she thought he



looked weary and worn out, and when the smile was gone there was a troubled expression.

"Was it a lively luncheon, Eve?" he asked, giving her his hand as she took up her favourite position behind his high-backed chair.

It was a colossal chair, with broad stuffed arms, upon one of which she sometimes seated herself, liking to nestle against him, yet not so loquacious as to interrupt his reading; sometimes reading with him; dipping into some French novel which he read from sheer idleness, not because he had any taste for the thinly beaten gold-leaf of Maupassant or Bourget.

To-day she stood behind his chair, silent, meditative, while he read and smoked.

"Was it pleasant—your party?" he asked presently, repeating the question she had left unanswered.

"Oh, it was pleasant enough. Sophy will tell you that it was delightful. I leave her to expatiate upon the people and the dishes and the talk. I was not in a very pleasant mood. There is a letter for you on the mantelpiece. You have not seen it, perhaps?"

"No," he said, startled by the angry agitation in her tone. "Is there anything particular about the letter?"

He put down his pipe and stood up, looking at her inquiringly. She was very pale, always with the exception of that hectic spot which Sefton had noticed, and which burned more fiercely now, the signal lamp of repressed passion.

He stretched out his hand to take the letter, half hidden by a little bronze Buddha with malevolent onyx eyes.



He recognized Lisa's unformed scrawl at the first glance.

"What is the matter with the letter?" he asked coldly.

"She brought it here herself, Jack,—that Italian woman—Signora Vivanti. I was coming down-stairs while she was at the door. I saw her give the letter to James. What can she have to write to you about? Why should she bring the letter with her own hand? How could she dare come to the house where your wife lives?" She flamed up at the last question, and her voice trembled at the word wife.

"I don't see why my wife's presence should alarm her, if she had need of immediate help from me."

"What should she want? Why should she come to you for help? Because you helped her once, in Italy, when she was poor and friendless? Is that a reason why she should pester you now?"

"If you will let me read her letter I may be able to tell you," he answered gravely.

It was a long letter, for in writing to the man she adored, Lisa let her pen run away with her. Nothing would ever induce her to marry Sefton, she told him; her heart was given to another; he knew who that other was, and that she could never change. Then came the warning of his danger. Sefton's savage hatred. It was a letter he could under no circumstances show to his wife. And there she stood waiting for the letter to be shown her, raging with jealousy, the love which had made her so angelic in her self-abnegation now transformed into a fire that made her almost diabolical.

"Well! May I see her letter?"



"No, Eve. The letter is confidential. She asks nothing from me—except perhaps approval of the course she has taken. She has had an offer of marriage—an offer that most young women in her position would accept without a second thought."

"And she has refused?" cried Eve, breathlessly.

"She has refused."

"Because she loves some one else—some one who can't marry her—but who can carry on an intrigue with her—an old intrigue—begun years ago. Some one whom she is trying to get into her net again. The net is spread—before my very eyes. That letter is to make an appointment."

He tore the letter across and across, and dropped the pieces into his waste-paper basket.

"Your thought is as far from the truth as it is unworthy of you, Eve," he said, in deep displeasure. "This young woman has never been more to me than I have told you. A woman in whom I was interested, chiefly because she was friendless."

"Chiefly, chiefly," she cried, catching at the qualifying word; "and the other reason?"

"If there was another reason, it had nothing to do with love. Does that satisfy you?"

"No," she answered gloomily. "Nothing you can say will prevent my being miserable. That woman has come into my life and spoilt it."

"Only because you are unreasonably and absurdly jealous. You are miserable of your own choice. You have me here, your faithful husband, unchanged in thought, act, or feeling since the day we rowed down the river; and yet you choose to consider me false, and



to torture yourself with vile suspicions, unworthy of a lady, unworthy of a wife."

"I cannot help it," she said. "We all have some latent sin, I suppose, and perhaps jealousy is mine. I never knew what it was to feel wicked before. Forgive me, Jack, if you can."

She took up his hand, kissed it, and then sank sighing into her chair, the chair she had christened Joan, while his, the colossal armchair, was Darby.

"I forgive you with all my heart, Eve, on condition that this little storm is the last outbreak. I should be sorry to think our married life was to be a succession of tempests in teacups."

"I promise to behave better in future. I hate myself for my folly."

Vansittart resumed his newspaper, too much shaken inwardly to court conversation. He felt himself living upon the crust of a volcano. This ceaseless jealousy was a matter of trivial moment in itself. He could have laughed it off, as too absurd for serious argument; but this jealousy brought Eve to the very edge of that secret which, revealed, might wreck two lives. The horror in front of him was a horror that meant doom. Every step that brought him nearer the hazard of revelation was a step that appalled him. He felt as if he were walking upon the crumbling edge of a cliff.

Eve bore with the silence for a few minutes, took off her bonnet, and carefully adjusted the petals of an artificial rose, studied the little fantasy of lace and flowers as if it were the gravest thing in the world, then flung it impatiently onto a chair, and began to smooth out her long suède gloves on her soft, silken



knee. Her nerves were strung to torture. She had pretended to be satisfied, while the tempest in her heart was still raging. She looked at her husband as if she hated him. Yes; it was hateful to see him sitting there, silent, imperturbable, reading his newspaper, while she was in the depths of despair. The fact that he had refused to show her that letter seemed almost an admission of guilt. If the thing which he had told her was true, the letter would have helped to confirm the truth. He would have been eager to show it to her. "Here," he would have said, "under the woman's own hand, you will see that she is nothing to me."

She brooded thus for about ten minutes, and then her irritation could submit to silence no longer.

"What was the City doing?" she asked. "The City which deprived me of your company at Mrs. Montford's luncheon."

"It was not the City's fault. I surrendered my place to Sophy."

"Oh, that's nonsense. There is always room enough and a welcome at Mrs. Montford's luncheons; but no doubt on a warm July morning the City is more attractive than Mayfair."

"Certainly, for those who are making or losing money," he answered, throwing down his paper and preparing to be sociable, though there was that in his wife's tone which told him her heart was not at ease. "What was the City doing?" he repeated. "Buying and selling, getting and losing. It is not half a bad place on a summer's morning, though you speak of it with the voice of the scorner. I walked across St. Paul's



Churchyard. They have turned an old burial-ground into a flower-garden; and there were nurses and children, and homeless ragamuffins lying asleep in the sun, and pigeons—tame pigeons—that fed out of the children's hands. It might have been Venice."

He started and turned deadly pale. It was the first time he had ever pronounced the name of the fatal city, voluntarily, in his wife's hearing. His nerves were overstrained—as much as hers, perhaps—and the mere name took his breath away.

Eve saw the startled look, the sudden pallor.

"I understand!" she cried passionately. "It was at Venice you met that woman. Venice, not Verona. The very name of the place agitates you! The very name of the place where you knew her and loved her moves you more than all I have said to you—than all my pain!"

"You are a fool," he said roughly. "A fool like Fatima, the type of all woman-fools."

"It was Venice."

"It may have been Venice. Who cares; or what does it matter?"

"It may have been! What hypocrisy! Do you think I am a child, to be hoodwinked by your feeble prevarications? Every look, every word, tells me that you have loved that woman better than you ever loved me—that you are still in her net."

"It was at Venice, then, if you will have it," he answered, beside himself. "At Venice, on a Shrove Tuesday, in Carnival time, five years ago. Are you satisfied now? That is the first half of the riddle."

His pale cheek grew whiter, his head fell back



upon the dark velvet cushion, his whole frame collapsed. He was as near fainting as a strong man could be.

Eve rushed to a little table, where she was privileged to write her letters now and then—business letters, she called them, chiefly relating to spending money. Here, among silver ornaments and fanciful cutlery, there was a big bottle of eau de Cologne, which she half emptied over her husband's temples.

"Thanks," he murmured, "You meant it kindly; but you've almost blinded me. I'm all right now. It was only a touch of vertigo. I've had no luncheon; and a man can't live upon tobacco and emotional arguments."

## CHAPTER X.

"CLOSER AND CLOSER SWAM THE THUNDER-CLOUD."

EVE was very sorry for her husband after that tragical scene in the study; but what profiteth a jealous wife's sorrow if she is unconvinced; if heart and brain are still racked with doubts and angry questionings, while her calmness, her submission are only on the surface, the subterranean fires still burning?

Vansittart took a high hand with the woman he loved. There must be no more quarrels, he told himself. He could not control his tongue even in his own interests, if she were to goad him any further. In their next encounter the secret would explode. He could not live this slave's life for ever. It was not in him to go on prevaricating and fencing with the truth.



He told her, gently but firmly, that she must torment him no more with false imaginings. If she could not believe in his fidelity it would be wiser for them to part. Better to be quietly miserable asunder, than to live together in an atmosphere of distrust.

At this hint of parting she flamed up, her doubt changed for a moment to conviction.

"Part!" she cried. "Perhaps that is what you would like?"

"I would like anything better than this madness, Eve," he answered wearily. "We cannot be worse than utterly wretched, and we are that now, and shall be as long as you harbour unworthy suspicions."

His face looked like truth, his voice rang true. She flung herself on her knees beside his chair, and clasped and cried over his hand.

"I will not torment you. I will not plague and torture myself any more," she sobbed. "It is only because I love you too much, and a breath makes me fear that I may lose you. I will trust you, Jack, in spite of your mysteriousness, in spite of your refusing to show me that letter, which I had a right to see, a right as your wife. No husband should receive a letter from any woman which he dare not show his wife."

"I did not choose to show you that letter."

"Well, you did not choose, perhaps. It was temper, I dare say. I was like the children who are refused a thing because they don't ask properly. I did not ask properly, and you snubbed me, and treated me as a child. But I won't be Fatima again, Jack. If there is a blue chamber in your life, I won't tease you for the key of it."



"That's my own good wife. Remember how happy we were on Bexley Hill, Eve, in our old courting days, when you knew me so little and trusted me so much. Surely after two years of wedlock you should trust me more and not less—two years in which you and I have been all the world to each other."

"Yes, yes, I was foolish. I hate myself for my mad jealousy. You have found the ugly spot in my character, Jack. I did not know it was there."

"Shall I be angry with my love for loving me too well?" he said, as he folded the slender form to his heart.

How slender, how ethereal she was, the tall slip of a girl whose graceful shape had never developed matronly solidity. A thrill of fear ran through him at the thought of her fragility, too frail a sapling to stand firm against the storms of life.

"God keep her from knowing the truth," he prayed dumbly, as she hung upon his breast. "It would break her heart."

After this there came a halcyon interval. Eve was satisfied, convinced that she was beloved, and what more could a woman want in this world? There was only one thing that stood in the way of perfect peace. Vansittart had business in the City on two other mornings, and those disappearances Citywards worried her. The City, as Sefton had said, was not in her husband's line.

When she questioned him about the business that drew him eastward he answered lightly that he went to his stockbrokers to make some small changes in his investments. That very lightness of his, which was meant to spare her a serious anxiety, awakened her suspicions.



The actual cause of Vansittart's unusual interest in the money market was sufficiently serious. A panic had occurred in some South American Railway Stock from which some part of his income was derived, and he was watching the market and the tide of affairs in Brazil, waiting the hour when it might be needful to sell out and snatch the remnant of his capital, or the turn of the tide which should justify his holding on and hoping for a renewal of the good days gone.

To this end he went to his stockbroker's every day, and heard the latest news, the last opinions, dawdling in the office, hearing the wise men of the East and their counsel. The hazards, the suspense, excited him. He grew interested in the money market, and felt all the gambler's keenness. The City drew him like the loadstone rock that took the nails out of Sinbad's ship. It was better than Monte Carlo. A third of his fortune trembled in the balance.

He would not tell Eve the whole truth, believing that it would worry her into a fever. She would exaggerate this fear as she had exaggerated her jealous doubts. She would foresee beggary, and be haunted by nightmare dreams of houselessness and starvation. He did not know that to a woman money-troubles are the lightest of all woes. A husband suspected of infidelity, a child down with measles, will afflict the average woman more than the loss of a fortune.

Sophy was enjoying herself to her uttermost capacity of enjoyment. This was life indeed. It was the last week of the season, the week before Goodwood, and there was a sense of the end of all things in the air.



A good many of the people who were not going to Goodwood were going away, starting for Homburg, Marienbad, Wildbad, Auvergne, or the Pyrenees, in advance of the universal rush which would make sleeping-cars impossible, and travelling odious. It annoyed Sophy to hear people talk of getting away; as if London were worn out and done with, London which she was enjoying so intensely. This was the fly in the ointment for Sophy. She felt aggrieved that her sister should have invited her at the end of the season. Yet there was one compensating delight. The sales were on: those delicious drapery sales, which had always been Sophy's highest ideal of earthly happiness, even when her strained resources had compelled her to turn with unsatisfied longing from a counter where odd lengths of silk and velvet were being all but given away. She had lain broad awake in her attic chamber at Fernhurst regretting those bargains, which would have made her a richly dressed woman at the most moderate cost. The counters of Marshall, and Debenham, and Robinson, and Lewis, at the end of the season, were to Sophy as the board of green cloth to the gambler. She felt that fortunes were to be won for those who had money to stake, fifteen guinea frocks for three pounds, two guinea parasols at nine and eleven pence.

Eve took her sister to the sales, and financed the situation. With a judicious expenditure of twenty pounds Sophy secured treasures that would last her through the coming autumn and winter, and, with Eve at her elbow, resisted the allurements of unsuitable finery. These shopping mornings were rapture to Sophy, and not without pleasure to Eve. It was pleasant to see Sophy's



joyous excitement, as she hung tremulously between two fabrics which the shopman exhibited for her choice—a bengaline at three and nine-pence, which had been seven shillings—a watered silk at two and eleven-pence, which had been eight and sixpence. After intense consideration Sophy settled on the watered silk, not because she liked it best, but because of the “had been.” The original price decided her—not taking into account that the price was reduced in the exact ratio of the material’s unfashionableness, and that she might find herself next winter the only young woman in watered silk. There was for Eve also the pleasure of buying presents for Jenny and Hetty, the two sisters who were pining in their rustic bower, while Sophy was draining the wine-cup of London gaieties. It was delightful to Eve to feel that a few pounds could buy them happiness: and she brought all her knowledge of good and evil to bear upon her selections for those absent ones.

“You have such a very quiet taste,” said Sophy, rather regretfully. “I call those cottons and foulards you have chosen almost dowdy.”

“You won’t think so when you see them made up. I’m afraid your scarlet pongee will look rather too showy for country lanes.”

“My dear Eve, I shall keep it for garden-parties till it begins to get shabby. Scarlet gives just the right touch of colour in a landscape.”

“Yes, but I think one would always rather that somebody else should give the touch.”

“Mr. Sefton said yesterday that fair-haired women should wear scarlet.”

Mr. Sefton was Sophy’s great authority. He had



been very polite to her, very pleasant, very confidential, talking to her about London society as if she were to the manner born, and had been brought up in the very midst of these people whom she saw to-day for the first time. This flattered her; indeed, his whole speech was made up of flattery, that subtle adulation which did not express itself in mere words, but which was indicated rather by a deference to her opinion, a quickness in laughing at her little jokes, an acceptance of her as on his own intellectual level. "You and I know better than the common herd," was expressed in all his conversation with her.

When they met in the evening it was only natural she should tell him her sister's plans for the next day, whether they were going to spend the morning in the park or at the picture-galleries. Sophy was eager for picture-seeing when there was nothing better to be done. Those galleries would give her so much to talk about at autumn tea-parties, such a superior air among women who thought they did a great deal for art when they fatigued themselves at the Royal Academy.

If they sat in the Park for an hour or so before luncheon Sefton contrived to find them there—if they were picture-seeing he dropped into the gallery, and criticized the pictures in a delightfully technical manner which provided Sophy with a treasury of art phrases especially adapted for country use. If they were at a theatre in the evening he was there too. Eve warned Sophy that he was only a philanderer.

"You remember how disagreeably attentive he was to me," she said, reddening at the recollection, "and yet, you see, he never meant anything."



"We were worse detrimentals then than we are now," argued Sophy. "Your marriage has altered our position, and now that the father lives abroad a man need not be afraid of marrying one of his daughters. I don't mean to say that Mr. Sefton is going to make me an offer; but he is certainly very attentive."

"Yes, he is very attentive, I admit. He likes being attentive to girls. Nothing pleases him better than to try the effect of that musical voice of his, and his nicely chosen phrases, upon any girl who will listen to him—like Orpheus leading the brute beasts with his lyre. I doubt if he cares any more for the girls than Orpheus cared for the beasts. He is false for falsehood's sake."

"You are very bitter against him, Eve," retorted Sophy. "Yet I dare say you would have married him if he had asked you."

"I think not."

"Oh, nonsense. You would not have refused to be mistress of the Manor. Merewood is a hovel in comparison."

"Merewood has the man I love for master. If Jack had been the lodge-keeper I would have married him, and washed and cooked and mended for him, and opened the gate and curtsied to the gentry, and been happy."

"Bosh!" said Sophy, very angry. "That's the way girls talk when they are first engaged. It sounds ridiculously sentimental from an old married woman like you. You are absurdly prejudiced against Mr. Sefton."

"Call it prejudice, if you like. I call it instinct. Birds are prejudiced against cats. I look upon Mr. Sefton as my natural enemy."



"And I suppose, if he calls, you will be uncivil, and spoil my chances?"

"No, I will not spoil your chances—such as they are."

"How disagreeably you say that. One would think you were jealous of an old admirer."

"No, I am not jealous; only I don't like to see you duped by attentions that mean nothing. I have no doubt Mr. Sefton does admire you—I only fear his admiration is worthless—but I will do everything that a sister can do to encourage him."

After this conversation Eve was particularly polite to Mr. Sefton. Poor Sophy was so terribly in earnest in her desire to make a good marriage. The elder sister's success had been so rapid and so startling, so easy a conquest, so delightful a settlement in life, that it was natural the younger sister should cherish hopes on her own account. People told Sophy that she was growing more and more like Eve. Hope's flattering tale told her that she was quite as pretty, while vanity suggested that she had more *savoir faire*. Poor Sophy had always prided herself upon her *savoir faire*, though how a quality which is, as it were, the final polish produced by society friction, could have been acquired by a young lady in a cottage at Fernhurst, must needs remain a mystery. Eve looked at her sister, and saw that she was prettier than the ruck of girls to be met in a London season. Her beauty had the dewy freshness that comes of a rustic rearing; her eyes were brighter than the eyes of the hardened fashionable belle. Her complexion had the delicacy of colouring which



was characteristic of Colonel Marchant's daughters—which had been, alas! Peggy's chief beauty.

Sophy, dressed as Eve had dressed her, and with her somewhat rebellious hair treated artistically by the skilful Benson, was certainly a very attractive young woman; and it seemed to Eve not impossible that Sefton, beginning the flirtation without any serious aim, might end by asking Sophy to be his wife. He was entirely his own master, could marry to please himself, without consideration of worldly advantage; only, unhappily, those are just the men who generally marry for self-aggrandizement rather than for simple inclination. It is not as if all heiresses were hideous or disagreeable, ignorant or underbred. Even England can furnish richly dowered young women who are both handsome and amiable; so why, asks the youthful peer or landowner, should I marry some portionless beauty, when I may as easily add to my revenue or treble my acreage? The original possessor considers his estate as the nucleus of a great property, which he and each successive holder should increase by judicious alliances; until the rolling mass swells into a territory like the duchy of Cleveland, and its acres are reckoned by thousands. Eve had heard the mothers and fathers talk of their sons' views and duties, even if the sons themselves did not openly avow their intention of marrying to better themselves.

The only hope in Sophy's case lay in a certain eccentricity of temper in Mr. Sefton which might show itself in a disadvantageous marriage. The very fact that he had remained so long a bachelor indicated that he was not eager for a prize in the matrimonial market. He had been content to stand by and see many prizes



carried off by men who were personally and socially his inferiors.

He had been a frequent visitor in Charles Street since Sophy's arrival. Her liveliness evidently pleased him; they were always talking and laughing in corners wherever they met, and seemed to have worlds to say to each other.

"It is delightful to meet any one so fresh as your sister at the end of the season," he explained to Eve, "just when most of us are feeling dull and jaded, and almost ready to yawn in each other's faces, like my lord and my lady in the '*Marriage à la Mode*.'"

He invited Mrs. Vansittart and her sister to a tea-party, given in honour of Sophy, who had expressed an ardent desire to see the house in Tite Street—the bachelor den which little Mr. Tivett had described to her in glowing colours. Eve hesitated about accepting the invitation, knowing that her husband disliked Sefton as much as she did herself; but the hesitation was overcome by Sophy's arguments.

"He is giving the party on purpose for me," she pleaded. "The invitation arose out of my wish to see his library, which Mr. Tivett had been praising. He could not pay me a more marked attention, could he now?"

"It is certainly an attention," assented Eve, greatly troubled by Sophy's sanguine hopes, so likely to end in disappointment and humiliation.

"Don't spoil all my chances by refusing," urged Sophy. "He would be offended—and men are so easily choked off."

"Not a man who is really in earnest."



"Perhaps not—but he may not be quite in earnest yet. He may not have made up his mind. Of course I should be a very bad match. He cannot forget that all at once. There is a stage in which a man who is inclined to fall in love lets himself drift, don't you know, Eve? He may be drifting—and it would be a pity to discourage him."

Every woman is at heart a matchmaker. Eve yielded, and accepted Mr. Sefton's invitation for five o'clock tea and a little music.

"Shall you have any singing?" she asked, with a sudden fear of meeting Signora Vivanti.

No—there would be no singing.

"I only asked the American banjo man to amuse you," said Mr. Sefton. "He is a capital fellow, and he does the most wonderful things with his banjo. He is a Paganini among banjoists. That, with the inevitable piano, will be more than enough music."

The afternoon, at the end of a brilliant July, was delightful, and the Embankment, with its red-brick palaces and its little bit of old Chelsea, looked just the one perfect place in which to live; to live an idle, artistic life, *bien entendu*, and bask in sunshine reflected from blue water. The tide was at the flood, the gardens were full of gaudy July flowers.

"How horrid Fernhurst will be after this!" sighed Sophy. "What a lucky man Mr. Sefton is to have a house in Tite Street, as well as the Manor!"

"Ah, but it is only a bachelor den, remember," said Eve. "He will do away with it when he marries."

"Not if his wife has any sense—unless she makes him change it for a larger house facing the river."



Mr. Sefton's house was near the corner, and commanded a side-long view of the Thames from all the front windows, and a still better view from an oriel in the library, which projected so as to rake the street. Sophy thought this small house in Tite Street, with its rich and sombre furniture and subdued colouring, quite the most enchanting house she had ever entered, second only to the Manor House itself, which she had seen some years before on the never-to-be-forgotten occasion of a Primrose League garden-party given by Mr. Sefton in the interests of the cause. The Manor House and its splendours of art, its old gardens, and antique furniture were the growth of centuries, and owed their existence to Seftons who were dust. This twelve-roomed house in Tite Street was an emanation of the man himself. His temperament, his education, his tastes were all embodied here. This was the pleasure dome which he had built for himself—this was his palace of art.

She went from dining-room to library escorted by Mr. Tivett, who expatiated and explained to his heart's content, pointing out the exquisite workmanship of a table which made mahogany precious as jasper or ivory; the artistic form of those high-backed chairs, copied from an old French model; the Gobelin tapestry, which had neither the glow nor sheen of silken fabrics, and yet was six times as costly.

"This house of Sefton's just serves to remind one of what a parvenu's house is not," said little Tivett, sententiously.

Sophy looked at the titles of the books. How ignorant they made her feel! There was hardly one that she had ever seen before; and yet no doubt they



were the very cream of classic and modern literature, not to have read which stamped one as illiterate.

"I have been looking at your books," she said, when Sefton came in with Eve. "They are too lovely."

"Rather nicely bound, aren't they?" he said, smiling gently at her enthusiasm. "They are a somewhat scratch collection, not quite family literature; but those vellum bindings with the blue labels give a nice tone of colour against the prevailing brown."

"That is so like Sefton," said Mr. Tivett. "He values his books from an æsthetic standpoint. Thinks of the effect of their bindings, not of the literature inside."

"As one gets older reading becomes more and more impossible. There is a satisfaction in possessing books, but one's chief pleasure is in their outsides. I sit here sometimes after midnight, smoking the pipe of the lotus-eater and looking at my bindings, and I feel as if that were enough for culture."

"I dare say that is quite the pleasantest way of enjoying a library," said Mr. Tivett, as if he saw the matter suddenly in a new light.

"Of course it is. There's no use in thinking of the lifetime it would need to read all the great books. That way madness lies. De Quincey went into the question once arithmetically, and to read his bare statement is distraction. I think it was that calculation of his which first put me off reading."

"Then your books are only ornaments?" said Sophy, disappointed.

"My books are a dado by Riviere and Zaensdorf. There are a great many of them with the leaves un-



opened. I take out a volume now and then, and peep between the pages. One gets the best of a book that way—the flavour without the substance of the author. But I came to take you down to tea, Miss Marchant. My banjoist has arrived, and Lady Hartley and Mrs. Montford are doing all they can to spoil him."

"Is Lady Hartley here? How nice!" exclaimed Sophy, to whom Lady Hartley's dress, manners, and way of thinking were a continual study.

Eve's sister-in-law was Sophy's ideal fine lady.

"Lady Hartley is always nice to me," replied Sefton. "She never misses one of my afternoons if she is in town. She would sacrifice the Marlborough House garden-party for my tea and muffins."

"Ah, but I dare say you contrive to make your tea-parties exceptional. This banjoist, now. Everybody is dying to hear him."

They went down to tea, which was served in a little bit of a room at the back of the dining-room, from which it was divided only by a curtain of old Italian tapestry; a mere alcove in which eight or ten people made a mob. Flowers, ices, tea, chocolate, cakes, china, silver, damask embroidered by industrious Bavarians, everything was the choicest of its kind; and Mr. Sefton's valet, with a footman and a smart parlour-maid, waited admirably. The squeeziness of the room made the entertainment all the more enjoyable. The banjoist stood in the centre of the crowd, talking in the true American style, with an incisive cleverness, and that clear metallic speech which made the average British articulation sound slipshod and slovenly.

People were amused and delighted. He told anec-



dotes, firing them off as fast as the crackers which aggressive street boys explode on the pavement. The admiring circle forgot that his distinction was the banjo, and began to accept him as a wit. Mrs. Montford asked him to lunch; Lady Hartley booked him for her next cosy little dinner.

After tea they all trooped up the narrow staircase to the library which had to serve Mr. Sefton for a drawing-room. More people dropped in—neighbours, most of them, including Mr. Hawberk, the composer, and his wife—and the room filled before the banjoist began to play.

He played wonderfully, surprising the metallic instrument into melodious utterances. He sang and accompanied himself; he played in a concertante duet for banjo and piano—a delightful arrangement of the serenade from *Don Giovanni*, in which the banjo was now the melody, and now the accompaniment; he played on his banjo with a bow, as if it had been a violin, and produced an effect which was remarkable, although somewhat distressing. His banjo laughed; his banjo cried; and with those wailing notes there stole over the senses of the listeners a dream of weary Ethiopians resting after their day of toil in the rank verdure beside some broad Virginian river.

Mr. Sefton's visitors, who were chiefly feminine, flocked round the American, praising and descanting upon his talent. Little Tivett went about explaining, after his wont. He talked as if he had invented the banjoist.

"Did you really know him in America?" inquired Mrs. Montford, deluded by this little way of Mr. Tivett's.



"No, no; I was never in America in my life; but I knew him when first he came to London, before people began to talk about him. I told him what a hit he was going to make."

While Society was prostrating itself before a novel entertainer, Mr. Sefton and Sophy had drifted through the curtained archway to the little back room, which seemed, from its smallness, a kind of inner temple, where the treasures of the house might be found; as in the smallest rooms in old Italian palaces one looks for the most precious gems of art.

Sophy was talking and laughing with her host, radiant and happy. This tea-party seemed to her full of meaning. It was assuredly given for her pleasure. Mr. Sefton had said so. She had expressed a curiosity about his small house in Chelsea, and he had said instantly, "You must come and see it. I will ask some people to tea." What more could a man do for the woman he meant to marry? Sophy was intoxicated with this delicate token of subjugation. She imagined herself looked at and talked about as the future Mrs. Sefton. Unconsciously she gave herself some small airs of an affianced wife—chiding him; making little jokes at his expense; pretending to underrate his surroundings—the pretty childish graces and little pettish tricks which come naturally to the weaker sex before marriage, as if they were taking payment in advance for the tyranny they are to suffer afterwards.

They sauntered into the inner room, brushing against the tapestry curtains, and one glance at the sanctuary sent the blood to Sophy's cheeks in a hot, angry blush.

The most prominent position in the room was filled



by an easel draped with orange and gold brocade, and on the easel appeared a full-length portrait of Signora Vivanti in her character of "Fanchonette."

It was a dainty sketch in water-colours, suggested by a photograph, but with all the grace and power of a picture painted from the living model. The painter had caught the fire and sparkle of the Italian face, the richness of colouring, the wealth of a somewhat vulgar beauty. The photographer had seized a happy attitude of graceful abandon—not a photographer's pose.

She was seated, lolling in her chair, with averted shoulder, and looking backward out of the picture with a most provoking smile—Fanchonette's smile of daring and defiance, which had taken the town by storm.

The laced velvet bodice set off the bust and shoulders in all their beauty, the blue and white striped petticoat was short enough to show the well-shaped leg and large useful foot in scarlet stocking and neat buckled shoe. A grisette's little white muslin cap sat airily upon the splendid coils of blue-black hair. Beauty of the plebeian type could go no further. Eyes, hair, complexion, figure, all were perfect; and over and above all there was the charm of mutinous lip and flashing smile, a look that was bold without immodesty, the frank outlook of a nature unacquainted with guile.

Sefton watched Sophy's face as she stared at the portrait, and the pinched lips, the sickly pallor, smote him with a sudden remorse. He had been fooling this rustic for his own purposes, making her an instrument in his scheme of evil. He felt that he had gone too far. Poor harmless simpleton! What had she done that he should give her pain? Eve had slighted him;



Eve's husband had come between him and the woman who was his passion; but this simpering, chattering, giggling girl had done him no wrong; and it was a base treachery to have deluded her with flattering speeches and meaningless attentions. However, the harm was done, done with deliberate purpose; and he had only to carry out his plan to the end. He meant Sophy to be his means of communication with Eve. He meant to reach the wife's ear through the sister.

"I'll make his life as miserable as he has made mine, if I can," he said to himself.

Sophy stood before the portrait, dumb with misery. What did he mean—what could he mean by placing the singer's portrait there, the crowning gem of his luxurious rooms, a portrait which even her ignorant eye told her must be by the brush of a master, so bold and brilliant was the handling? Even the easel, with its costly draping of orange and gold, was a work of art. What right had he to exhibit such a portrait; the portrait of an improper young woman, in all probability?

She felt sorry that she had accepted his invitation. She felt as if she had been brought to a house which was hardly fit for her to enter. And yet there were the Montfords and Lady Hartley chattering at their ease in the next room; so it could hardly be "bad form" to come here.

"What do you think of the likeness?" asked Sefton, lolling against a tall Versailles chair, and contemplating the brilliant face in the picture with a smile.

"I suppose it is a very good likeness," said Sophy, "but of a vulgar face—very handsome, no doubt; nobody can deny that—but quite *peuple*."



"Yes, it is *peuple*. That is one of its charms. It has all the fire and freshness of an unsophisticated race, generations of fishermen, sailors, gondoliers, all that there is of a frank free life between sea and sky. You can't get such beauty as that from a race reared indoors. It is an open-air loveliness, as rich in grace and colouring as one of those strange sea-flowers that unfold their vivid petals under the clear bright water."

"You admire her very much?" faltered Sophy.

"Yes, I admire her very much. You and I have got on so well together, Miss Marchant, that I feel I may talk to you with all the freedom of friendship—and confide in you as I have confided in no one else. I do admire that woman, Miss Marchant, have admired her enthusiastically ever since she made her first appearance at the Apollo. I began by liking to hear her sing, liking to watch her bright spontaneous acting, like the acting of a clever child in its instinctive naturalness. Even her beauty charmed me less than that delicious spontaneity which struck a new chord in the genius of the stage. I went night after night to see her and hear her, without fear of danger; and unawares I became her slave. I love her as I never loved before—not even when I used to fancy myself in love with your charming sister. Against every other love, prudence, a selfish desire to retain my liberty, a vacillating temper, which made the desire of to-morrow unlike the desire of yesterday, have prevailed; but against the love I bear that woman," pointing to the laughing face in the picture, "reason has been powerless. Another man in my position might have tried to do what other men have been doing, ever since the first girl-Desdemona disgusted



John Evelyn and began the long line of actresses who have charmed the civilized world. Another man might have tried to win her by dishonourable means. I was not base enough for that."

Sophy crimsoned, remembering that dark story of the farmer's daughter, which Nancy had related to her, that well-meaning woman not being over-scrupulous in her communications to the ear of girlhood.

She waited silently, and Sefton went on, looking at the portrait, not at the woman to whom he was talking. An angry glow was on his cheek. An angry light was in his eyes. The thought of the social sacrifice he had been prepared to make and the futility of his offer lashed him to fury.

"I would not degrade her by a dishonourable proposal. No, though I knew she was not spotless—though I knew her as the mother of a nameless child. She was all the world to me, and what social consideration should a man set against that which is his all of happiness or hope? I asked her to be my wife, offered her my place in society, my passionate love, a life's devotion, and she refused me—refused me after more than a year of friendship, a friendship which had seemingly brought us very near to each other."

"She refused you?" exclaimed Sophy, beholding in one comprehensive glance this charming house in Tite Street, the Manor, and all its belongings dead and alive, together with this remarkably handsome and agreeable man to whom these things belonged! "She refused you! Why, what a preposterous minx she must be!"

"Yes, that's the word, Miss Marchant. It seems preposterous, doesn't it, that an Italian peasant, with



only her voice and good looks—and the hazardous success of a comic opera singer—for her fortune, should refuse an English gentleman with a handsome rent-roll. But the thing is true all the same. She refused me. Can you guess why?”

“I can only imagine that she is a brainless idiot,” said Sophy, feeling that she might be tempted to take out her bonnet pin and run it into that vivid face, if it were not for the glass which protected the picture.

She was too angry with Signora Vivanti for having won Mr. Sefton’s affections to be grateful to her for having refused his hand.

“There is always a reason for everything,” said Sefton, after a backward glance at the other room which showed him that there was no one near enough or unoccupied enough to overhear or observe him; the banjoist being still the centre of attraction, and everybody clustered about him in the neighbourhood of the piano. “There is always a reason if one will only look for it. Signora Vivanti refused me because she was in love with another man, the man she knew and loved in Venice, the man who brought her to London and established her in the house she occupies, and had her trained for the stage. Forgive me, Miss Marchant, if I go a step further and say the man who is the father of her son!”

Sophy drew herself up with an offended air, and flashed an angry look at him.

“You have no right to talk to me in this way, Mr. Sefton. I don’t understand why you should select me for your confidante,” she said icily, moving towards the next room.

“Pray forgive me. You are clever and sympathetic.



I have no sister, and in certain crises of life a man feels the need of a woman's sympathy. And then there were other reasons; or at least there was another reason."

He stopped, embarrassed, looking at her with a curious hesitation; looking from her to the group by the piano, where Eve's face shone out among the rest, smiling at the American's last ebullition.

"You are hinting at something dreadful," Sophy said, with a scared look. "Do you mean that the man is—is some one I know?"

"Don't tell her, Miss Marchant. I would not for worlds have her know. It would do no good. It might make her miserable. Women are so sensitive, even about the past, and I fear this affair is going on in the present."

"Don't tell her!" echoed Sophy. "You mean my sister! And the man is—Jack! Oh, what a wretch he must be!"

"Weak rather than wicked, perhaps. Don't be too hard upon him in your innocence of life. When a man has forged fetters of that kind it ain't easy to break them."

"A man so fettered has no right to marry. It would break her heart if she knew."

"She need not know. You won't tell her; and I'm sure I shan't. But you are a girl with strong sense; and you love your sister. I thought it only right that you should know."

"You may be mistaken."

"Hardly likely. It is an open secret that he established her in lodgings and paid for her education. And over and above that evidence there is the fact that he



still visits her. I met him leaving her rooms only a few days ago."

"The wretch! The hypocrite! He seems to idolize Eve!"

"And Eve is happy in that idolatry. For pity's sake, Miss Marchant, don't let her see the seamy side of a husband's character."

Eve came towards the archway at this moment.

"You have lost ever so many amusing stories," she said to her sister. "Your banjoist is the most entertaining person I have met this season, Mr. Sefton, and he has made us all oblivious of time. I have just discovered that it is ever so much past six."

"'Ever so much' meaning a quarter of an hour," retorted Sefton, laughing.

He dropped a fold of the brocade drapery as Eve drew near, and the portrait was hidden before her face appeared in the curtained arch.

He looked at her, trying to recall his feelings of a time gone by, when he had been—or had fancied himself—in love with her. Oh, what a weak, hesitating love that had been, as measured against his devotion to this scum of the lagunes—this gutter-bred minx who had scorned him!

"A preposterous minx!" he repeated to himself by-and-by, when he was alone. "I thank thee, child, for teaching me that word. Well, I have sown the wind; I wonder whether I shall have a prosperous harvest, and reap the whirlwind?"

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## CHAPTER XI.

"THOU MAYST BE FALSE AND YET I KNOW IT NOT."

BEFORE addressing his confidences to Sophy Marchant, Mr. Sefton had assured himself that she did not belong to that exceptional order of womankind who, in honour and discretion, are on a level with wise and honourable men. He had known the young lady quite long enough to know that, although sharp and clever, she was shallow-brained, impulsive, and emotional. He was very sure that with every desire to spare her sister pain she would end by telling Eve of her husband's infidelity. The secret would be kept for some days, perhaps, or even for some weeks; but it would be as a consuming fire, and would ultimately break out into flame—a flame that would devour his rival's peace of mind, and devastate his rival's home.

The more scathing that whirlwind which was to come from the wind of his sowing, the happier the result for Sefton. It was in vain that Lisa had denied her son's paternity. In Sefton's mind there was no shadow of doubt that Vansittart had been, and even now was her lover—and it was for love of Vansittart that his, Sefton's, honourable attachment had been scorned by her. King Cophetua had offered himself to the beggar-maid, and the beggar-maid had refused him. Was that a humiliation for a man to forgive? Was that a disappointment to go unavenged? All the latent malignity of Sefton's



nature was aroused into active life by that fierce passion of jealousy.

He had not misinterpreted Sophy's character. She was very silent in the homeward drive with her sister, lolling back in the victoria, looking vacantly at the carriages and the people as they passed.

"How tired you look, Sophy!" Eve said, as they crossed the park, where the carriages and riders and loungers had dwindled considerably within the past week. "I fancy even you begin to feel you have had enough of gadding about?"

"Yes, I have had enough, more than enough," Sophy answered, with a little choking sob.

She could no more suppress her own feelings, bear her own troubles, and be dumb, than a child can. It was quite as much as she could do to keep herself from crying, in the broad light of summer evening and Hyde Park.

"My poor Sophy, what has happened to distress you?" Eve asked affectionately. "You and Mr. Sefton had such a long confabulation in that inner room. I really thought the crisis had come."

"There was no crisis; there never will be. You were right. He was only fooling me. All his fine speeches, his sentimental talk—his way of holding one's hand as if he would like to squeeze it, and was only prevented by his deep respect for one—he *did* squeeze it at the carriage door that night when we stayed so late at Mrs. Macpherson's delightful party—it all meant nothing—less than nothing."

"But how do you know, Sophy?" Eve asked



earnestly. "He can't have told you that he doesn't care for you?"

"No; but he can have told me that he is in love with another woman—a low-born, ignorant creature, who can do nothing but sing and strut about the stage in the boldest, horriddest way, showing her lace petticoats and her legs," said Sophy, disgustedly, forgetting how she had admired Signora Vivanti.

"Do you mean the singer at the Apollo?" asked Eve.

"Yes, Signora Vivanti. He is in love with her, if you please, and she has refused him."

Eve remembered her husband's explanation of Lisa's letter.

"He told you this—chose you for his confidante. How odd!"

"Rather bad form, wasn't it? I fear I had been too—what young Theobald calls—coming on. I thought he liked me, and I encouraged him, and he rewards me by confiding his attachment to that creature."

"And she has refused to marry him. Why?" asked Eve, very pale.

"Who knows? Mere airs and graces, I dare say. She thinks she has all London at her feet, and that she can pick and choose. How I wish I were on the stage! I can sing pretty well, can't I, Eve? And I have often been told that I am like Ellen Terry."

In her angry excitement, Sophy saw a vision of herself as the queen of a theatre, all the town rushing to see her act, as they went to see this Venetian peasant. Surely a young lady with good blood in her veins must be better than a girl bred in a hovel. Sophy did not



pause to consider that it was the rough freshness, the primitive vigour of the peasant which constituted Signora Vivanti's chief claim to notice.

Sophy had exercised no small amount of self-control in restraining her tears during the homeward drive; but once safe in the sanctuary of her own bedroom she let loose the flood of her emotions, with its cross-currents of anger and sorrow, disappointed ambition, and disappointed love. Yes, love. Considering Mr. Sefton, in the first instance, only from the social point of view, with the mercenary feelings engendered by a youth of poverty, she had allowed herself to be beguiled by his attentions, and had entered at the golden gate of that fool's paradise which first love creates for its victim—a world of fevered dreams, where nothing is but what is not. Walking in the enchanted groves of that paradise, she had seen Mr. Sefton in the light that never was on land or sea—the light that beautifies all waking dreams—and she had interpreted every speech of his after her own fashion. Words lightly spoken took the deepest meaning—not his meaning, but hers. She told herself again and again that, if he had not actually asked her to be his wife, he had spoken words which a man only speaks to the woman whose life is to be interwoven with his own.

Eve came to her sister's door and insisted upon being admitted.

"Oh, what streaming eyes! Sophy, dearest, I am so sorry you have allowed yourself to care for him. I warned you, dear; I warned you."

"Yes," retorted Sophy, irritated beyond measure at a form of speech which is always irritating, "but you



didn't warn me of anything like the truth. You didn't tell me that he was passionately, ridiculously, degradingly in love with that Venetian girl."

"My dearest, how could I warn you of what I did not know?"

"Don't dearest me. I am almost out of my mind—indeed, I should not be surprised if I were to go mad, or have brain fever, or something. When I remember how I have lowered myself—letting him see that I cared for him; for I have no doubt he did see, and that was why he made me his confidante this afternoon, and told me about that creature—a woman with a nameless son. Do you think I can ever get over the degradation of being talked to about such a subject?"

Eve did not answer. She sank down upon the sofa, while her sister stood before the looking-glass, frowning at her tear-stained face as she unbuttoned the bodice of her gown, that gown which she made a point of calling her "frock."

Her nameless son. Eve remembered the boy in the boat, the beautiful Murillo-faced boy, looking up with big wondering eyes as his mother and Vansittart clasped hands. Her nameless son. She remembered that curious speech of Vansittart's a week ago—"Yes, it was at Venice we met. That is the first half of the riddle." What was the second half? The parentage of that boy, perhaps. His son—his son—another woman's and his. And she, his adoring wife, had no son to place in his arms, no child to gratify the prosperous man's desire to see his race prolonged.

"If I live to be an old woman he may die without an heir," she thought. "There may be no more Van-



sittarts of Merewood. Hannah's husband did not hate her because she was childless—but then he had other wives."

She pictured her husband loving that alien's son, making him his heir perhaps by-and-by, desiring to bring him into his home, asking her to receive Hagar's child, to let him call her mother. She had heard of such things being done.

"No, no, no, not for worlds," she protested to herself. "I could not do it."

She got up and walked about the room, while Sophy bathed her eyes, and tried to undo the damages her emotions had inflicted on her fair and delicate prettiness.

"I can't go to the party looking like this," exclaimed Sophy, ruefully contemplating her swollen eyelids in the glass.

"We need not go till half-past ten. Eleven o'clock would be early enough. There is time for you to get back your good looks. Benson shall bring you a light little dinner, and then you had better lie down and take a long nap."

"Do you think I can eat or sleep in my state of mind?" protested Sophy; but a quarter of an hour later, when Benson appeared with an appetizing meal, the victim of misplaced affection found that violent emotions are not incompatible with hunger.

She eat an excellent dinner, cried a little now and then between whiles, and at half-past ten went down to the drawing-room in her most attractive frock, and with her light fluffy hair piled as high as she could pile it,



and sparkling with those dainty paste stars which Eve had sported at the memorable hunt ball.

"Sophy," cried Vansittart, "I vow you look almost as pretty as Eve looked that night in the snow. And what do I see? Surely I know those quivering starlets! You are wearing the family diamonds."

Sophy rewarded him with a most ungracious scowl, and moved to the other side of the room. Vansittart was looking at an evening paper, and was serenely unconscious of the change in his sister-in-law's manner; but Eve saw that angry glance and movement of avoidance, and wondered what could have caused such rudeness. Temper, perhaps; only poor Sophy's petulant temper, which had never been discriminating in its outbursts.

This was Sophy's way of keeping a secret. Her visit to Charles Street ended two days later. She was studiously uncivil to her host up to the hour of her departure; and in her farewell talk with her sister, being closely questioned by Eve as to the reason of this change in her manner, she prevaricated, hesitated, said things and unsaid them; and finally, in a flood of compassionate tears, she protested that it was only on Eve's account she was angry with Eve's husband. Mr. Sefton had told her that Vansittart still visited that odious woman. Mr. Sefton had met him leaving her house only a few days previously; and Mr. Sefton had assured her that it was he, Eve's husband, who had brought Signora Vivanti to London, and paid for her musical education.

"Can you wonder that I am angry with him, Eve, loving you as I do? You have been so good to me, so generous. It would be wicked of me to go away with-



out warning you. I hated the idea of telling you. I have thought over it again and again. I promised Mr. Sefton that I would tell you nothing; but I could not bear the idea of your being hoodwinked by an unfaithful husband. It was right to tell you, wasn't it, dear? It is better for you to know the truth, is it not?"

"Yes, yes, it is better for me to know," Eve answered, in a hard, cold voice.

"How quietly she takes it!" thought Sophy, as the footman announced the carriage.

Benson had gone on with Sophy's luggage in a four-wheeled cab; twice as much luggage as Sophy had brought from Fernhurst.

"I shall never forget your kindness to me," said Sophy, with her parting kiss.

"And I shall never forget your visit," answered Eve.

Eve was not at home at luncheon time, so Vansittart went off to his club, and only returned to Charles Street at Eve's usual hour for afternoon tea, when he was told that Mrs. Vansittart had gone out at three o'clock, and had left a note for him in the study.

The note was a letter.

"I am taking a step which will no doubt make you angry," Eve began, "but I cannot help myself. I cannot go on living as we are living now. Every hour of my life increases my misery. I have been told that you visit that woman—that woman who is the cause of all my unhappiness. I have been told—what I ought to have understood without telling—that it is you who brought her to London, and had her educated for the



stage; that her child is your child. I ought to have known all this without being told; but I shut my eyes to the truth. I wanted so to believe in you. I clung so desperately to that which makes the happiness of my life. You accuse me of unreasoning jealousy; but could any wife help being jealous, seeing what I have seen, hearing what I hear? That woman's face and manner spoke volumes. I tried to accept your explanation—tried to believe you. I had even begun to feel happy again, when I learnt this hateful fact of your visit to her house. I cannot believe that you would have gone there, knowing my feelings on the subject, if this love of the past had not been more to you than your love for me, your wife. There is but one thing for me to do, only one thing which can set my mind at rest, or make me wretched for ever; and that is to see this woman, and hear her story from her own lips. I have no fear that I shall fail in getting at the truth when she and I are face to face. Woman against woman, wife against mistress, I know who will be the stronger.

"If I have wronged you, my beloved, your wife in penitent love. If you have wronged me, your wife no longer—EVE."

A pleasant letter to greet a husband on his home-coming.

"Woman against woman, face to face, those two!" thought Vansittart. "She will discover—not that which she fears to discover, but a darker secret—and then it will be as she has said, my wife no longer."

He stood with his finger on the button of the bell till a servant came.



"A hansom instantly, but be sure you get a good horse," he said, and went into the hall to wait for the man's return.

## CHAPTER XII.

### IN THE BLUE CHAMBER.

EVE had learnt Madame Vivanti's address from Lady Hartley the day after the singer's appearance in Hill Street. So her letter to her husband written, and her mind made up, she had only to drive to Saltero's Mansion to make her way to that upper floor in which the singer had her bower. The door was opened by Fiordelisa herself, who gave a little look of surprise at seeing her visitor, and then stood in mute wonder, waiting for Eve to speak, smiling faintly, and evidently embarrassed.

She wore her accustomed black stuff gown, with a yellow silk handkerchief knotted carelessly on her breast, and her dark hair heaped untidily upon the top of her head. The boy was hanging on to her gown, and peeping shyly at the strange lady, so pure and fresh-looking in her soft grey silk, and dainty little hat with grey feathers faintly touched with pink. Lisa noted her rival's toilette in all its elegant details, the long loose grey gloves, the grey parasol.

For a minute or so the two women stood thus, looking at each other in silence. Then, with an effort, Eve spoke.

"Are you alone, Madame Vivanti?"



"Alone, all but Paolo, and I don't suppose you count him anybody, Eccellenza. La Zia has gone to London."

"I have come to talk to you—about my husband."  
Lisa flushed crimson.

"Please take the trouble to sit down, Eccellenza," she said politely, placing her prettiest armchair in front of the open window.

There were flowers in the balcony, a bed of marigolds, a flower which la Zia had discovered to be decorative and cheap. For perfume there were stocks and mignonette. The balcony was wide enough to hold plenty of flowers, and a couple of basket chairs in which Lisa and her aunt sat for many idle hours in fine weather, breathing the cool breezes from the river, and submitting to the blacks. They thought of their attic window in the Campo, and the life and movement in the paved square below, the passing and repassing of the gay, light-hearted crowd to and fro on the Rialto, the twanging of a guitar now and then, the tinkling of wiry mandolines, the nasal tones of a street-singer. Here they had a wider horizon, but a murkier sky, and not that concentration of gaiety which makes every campo in Venice a busy little world, self-contained and all-sufficing. Eve looked round the room, noting the pretty furniture, obviously chosen by a person of taste; the open piano; the glimpse of a somewhat untidy bedroom through a door ajar. Her husband had chosen the furniture, Eve told herself. He had built this nest for his Venetian singing-bird.

"I am looking at your rooms," she said, with pale lips; "the rooms my husband furnished for you."



Lisa had not even the grace to attempt a denial.

"He was very good, very generous," she faltered, her eyes suffused with tears, those tears which came so readily to Lisa's eyes, on the stage or off. "There never was any one so good as he."

"He owed you at least as much as that," said Eve, sternly. "It was the least he could do."

"Ah, he has told you then," cried Lisa, eagerly; "he has told you his secret?"

"No, he has not told me. He was too much ashamed to tell me of anything so degraded and shameful. He is not shameless like you," said Eve, trembling with indignant feeling.

It was all true then, all that Sefton had told her sister; all that her own jealous fears had suggested. This woman stood before her, unabashed, ready to expatiate upon her sin.

"He has told me nothing," she said, "or if he has spoken of you it has only been to deceive me. But there are some things that are easy to guess, when a woman has lived in the world as I have, and has heard other women talk. Two years ago perhaps I might have been fooled by his falsehoods; but I am wiser now. I knew from the first that you had been his mistress; that he was the father of that boy."

She pointed to the unconscious Paolo, sprawling on the floor, turning the leaves of a picture-book, and doing his utmost to destroy an indestructible "Jack the Giant Killer," printed on stout linen.

"You knew what was not true, then," said Lisa, drawing herself up, with crimson cheeks and flaming eyes. "You pretend to know that which is false, false, *una bugia*



*indegna*. He was never anything to me but a friend, my generous and noble friend. He hired this apartment for us, for la Zia and me, and he furnished these rooms, and he bought me that piano, and he paid the good Zinco to teach me to sing. *È vero!* I owe him my fortune, and all I have in the world. I would walk barefoot all over this earth if I could make him happier by my toil. There is nothing in this world I would not do for him."

"And you want me to believe that he did all this for friendship—mere friendship—he, an English gentleman, for an Italian peasant?"

"I don't want you to believe anything, and I don't care what you believe. He is all the world to me. You are nothing—less than nothing!" cried Lisa, passionately. "I hate you. If it had not been for you he would have married me, perhaps. Who knows?"

"You think he would have married you! And yet he was only your friend, you say."

"He was only my friend."

"He brought you and your aunt from Italy and set you up in London; and yet he was only your friend."

"He did not bring us from Italy. We came to London of our own accord. He was only my friend. He was never any more than my friend. If he had been I would not disown him. I love him too well to be ashamed."

"You own that you love him?"

"Yes, I am not ashamed of my love. There are people somewhere who worship the sun. I am no more ashamed than they are. I told him of my love on my knees in this room, where you are sitting. I knelt at his feet and asked him to give me heart for heart. I



thought then that he would hardly have been so kind to me and my aunt unless he loved me. But he told me that he loved an English girl, and that she was to be his wife. There was no hope for me. I wanted to kill myself, but he stopped me with his strong arms. Yes, for just one moment I was in his arms! Only one moment, and then he flung me from him as if I were dirt."

"He must have been very chivalrous to do so much for friendship," said Eve, shaken, but not convinced.

The woman spoke with the accents of truth; but Eve remembered that she was an actress, trained in the art of simulated passion. No doubt it was easy for an actress to lie like truth.

"He wanted to help us," protested Lisa; "he blamed himself so much for——"

She stopped, coloured, and then grew pale. It was evident to her now that Vansittart's wife had been told nothing, and she, Lisa, had been on the point of betraying him.

"For what? Why did he blame himself?"

"Did I say 'blame'? I use wrong words sometimes," she said, quick to recover herself. "I hardly know your language. He pitied us: that is what I meant to say. He pitied us because we were alone and poor—two helpless women."

"And the father of your child, where was he?" Eve asked sternly, only half convinced. "Why did not he help you?"

Paolo had grown tired of his book, and had gone back to his mother's knee. He stood half hidden in Lisa's gown, looking earnestly at the stranger, his infantile mind puzzled at the tone and manner



of the two women, feeling dimly that there was a tempest in the atmosphere, feeling it as the birds feel when they twitter apprehensively before the coming of the thunder. Inquisitive as well as alarmed, and bold in his wonder, he went over to Eve, and took hold of her gown, and looked up in her face.

She looked down at him, and it was her turn to wonder.

Of whom did the face remind her? He was like his mother; but it was not her face he recalled to Eve. Nor was it Vansittart's face, though she tried, shrinkingly, to trace a resemblance there, looking for something she hoped not to see. No, the face recalled some other face, and the likeness, faint and indefinable as it was, thrilled her with a tremulous awe, as if she had seen a ghost.

"You had a claim upon this child's father," said Eve, her hand lightly touching the boy's head, and then shrinking away as if it had touched pollution; "the strongest possible claim, for he ought to have been your husband. Why did not he help you?"

"Because he was in his grave," said Lisa; and again the ready tears gushed out.

There was a pause, and then Eve spoke in a gentler tone.

"That was hard for you," she said, with a touch of pity.

"Yes, it was very hard. He had promised to marry me. I think he would have married me, for Paolo's sake. My baby was not born till afterwards—after his father's death."

"Poor creature. All that was very sad. Was my



husband—was Mr. Vansittart a friend of the man who died? Was it for his friend's sake he was so kind to you?"

"No, he was not a friend. It was for my sake, and la Zia's, that he was kind. I tell you again, he pitied us."

Eve sank into a chair, drooping, miserable. Even yet she could not believe in this story of Vansittart's chivalrous kindness to two foreign waifs who had no claim upon his friendship, not even the claim of country. She knew him to be benevolent, generous, full of compassion for all suffering of man or beast; but there was nothing Quixotic in his benevolence. That which he had done for Lisa was too much to be expected of any man who was not a millionaire or a musical fanatic. He could not have done so much without a strong motive. And then once again she reminded herself that Lisa was an actress, to whom all falsehoods and shams must be easy. She started to her feet, indignant with this woman for deceiving her; angry with herself for being so easily duped.

"I don't believe a word you have told me," she cried. "I believe that Mr. Vansittart was your lover; my husband, John Vansittart, and no other; and when he came here the other day you had lured him back to your net."

"You don't believe—you don't believe in Paolo's dead father? Don't cry, Carissimo; she is a cruel woman, but she shan't hurt you." The boy had begun to whimper, scared by the women's angry voices. "I will make you believe. I will show you his likeness—the likeness I have never shown to any one else. It is a bad one; it does not make him half handsome enough. He was



handsome; he had hair as light as yours, only redder, and he was very fair—a true Englishman. He was not as handsome as your husband—no, there is no one else like *him*. Shall I show you his picture? Will you believe me then?”

She did not wait for an answer, but ran into the adjoining room, pulled a heavy, iron-clamped box from under the bed—the box which contained her jewels—unlocked it, and came running back with a photograph in her hand.

“Ecco, Signora. It was taken at Burano, by a man who came from Venice one summer morning, and photographed the church, and the street, and the bridge, and as many of the people as would pay him a few soldi for a likeness. I have kept it hidden away since he died. It hurt me to look at it, remembering his end. But there!”—pushing the photograph in front of Eve’s sullen, distrustful countenance—“look at it to your heart’s content, Signora. That man was the father of my child! Believe, or not believe, as you please.”

Eva glanced with a careless contempt at the faded sun-picture—a bad photograph, which time had made worse—the blurred image of a face which, as her widening gaze fastened upon it, flashed back all the picture of her childhood upon the mirror of her memory.

“Oh, God!” she cried. “My brother Harold!”

The door opened as she spoke, and looking up she saw her husband standing on the threshold.

She appealed to him hopelessly in her bewilderment.

“Did you know?” she asked. “Was it for my sake you were kind to her? Was that the link between you?”



"No, Fatima," he answered sternly. "My Blue Chamber holds a ghastlier secret than that. I was kind to her because I killed her lover. Are you satisfied now? You wanted to know the worst. You would not be content. We were united, happy, adoring each other; the happiest husband and wife in all London, perhaps; but you would not be satisfied. I entreated you to trust me. I assured you, with every asseveration a man could make, that I was true to you. But you would not believe. You were like your first namesake; you lent your ear to the whisper of the snake. You were jealous by a woman's instinct, and you let Sefton feed your jealousy. Well, you are content now, perhaps. You have his picture in your hand—the picture of the man I killed."

"You killed him? You?"

"It sounds like madness, doesn't it, but it's true all the same. A vulgar incident enough—nothing romantic about the story. The man whose likeness you hold, and whom you recognize as your brother—that man and I met as strangers in a Venetian caffè, in Carnival time. This young woman here and her aunt were with me—the chance acquaintance of the afternoon. We had known each other only a few hours, had we, Fiordelisa? You did not even know my name."

"Only a few hours," nodded Lisa.

"He had been on a journey, and had been drinking. He came on us unawares; and he chose to take offence because Lisa and her aunt and I were sitting at the same table. He was easily jealous—as you are. It runs in the family, perhaps. He assaulted me brutally, and I fought him almost as brutally. It would have all



ended harmlessly enough with a rough mauling of each other—perhaps a black eye, or a broken nose—but as Fate would have it I had a dagger ready to my hand—and exasperated at a little extra brutality on his part I stabbed him. Luck was against us both. That single thrust of a dagger might have resulted in a trivial wound. It killed him.”

“And you let me love you—you let me be your wife—knowing that you had murdered my brother?” said Eve, trembling in every limb, white as death.

“No, Eve. It was not murder. It is the intention that makes the crime. He was unarmed, drunk. I ought to have spared him, I suppose—but he fell upon me like a tiger. It was brute force against brute force. The knife was an unlucky accident.”

“He had just bought it in the Procuratie,” explained Lisa; “he had no thought of killing him. You do not know how violent the Englishman could be. He was cruel to me sometimes—he struck me many times when he was angry.”

“You take the part of the murderer against the murdered—though this man would have married you, would have made you an honest woman.”

“He had promised,” said Lisa, doubtfully.

Eve put the photograph to her white lips and kissed it passionately, again, and again, and again.

“Oh, Harold,” she said, “to have hoped so long for your return, to have prayed so many useless prayers! You were dead—dead before that child was born.”

She looked at the boy, reckoning the years by the child’s growth. Four years, at least, she told herself.

“And you dared to make me your wife, to let me



love you with a love that was almost worship," she cried, turning upon Vansittart with dilated eyes, "knowing that you had killed the brother I loved so dearly. You heard me talk of him—you pretended to sympathize with me—and you knew that you had killed him."

"I did not know. There was no such thing as certainty. When I asked you to be my wife I knew nothing of your brother's fate. Afterwards, when we were engaged, the idea was suggested to me by your officious friend Sefton—who wanted to put a stumbling-block in the way of our marriage. He succeeded in tracing your brother to Venice, and he read the story after his own lights. He thought Harold Marchant was the man who struck the fatal blow. He did not take him for the victim. But the links in his chain of evidence were not over strong—and I had ample justification for not accepting his assertions as certainties. And you loved me, did you not, and our marriage was likely to make your life fairer and brighter, was it not?"

"What of that? Do you think I should have weighed my own love or my own happiness against my brother's life? Do you think I would have married you if I had known the truth?"

"You would not, perhaps; and two lives would have been spoilt by your loyalty to the dead—who would sleep none the more peacefully because you and I were miserable. Did you owe him so much, this wandering brother of yours? What kindness had he ever shown you? What care had he ever taken of you?"

"He was my brother, and I loved him dearly."

"And did not I love you, and had not I some claim



upon you?" asked Vansittart, indignantly. "Could you have let me go without a tear?"

"No, no, no. I adored you from the first—yes, that first night on the snowy road, and at the ball, when you were so kind. Other people sneered at our misfortunes, but you and your sister were all kindness—and I began to love you almost at once, foolishly, ridiculously, without a hope of being loved again. But, let my love be what it would, the love of a lifetime, it would have made no difference. Nothing would have induced me to marry the man who killed my brother. Oh, God," she cried hysterically, "the hands that I have kissed so often—stained with Harold's life-blood!"

"I thought as much," said Vansittart, doggedly. "I told myself that you would not marry me if you knew my secret. I told myself that two lives would be spoilt—it was a question, perhaps, of half a century of happiness for two people, to be sacrificed because of the angry passions of one night—of a night, of a minute. The deed was done in less time than the bronze giants of the clock-tower would have taken to strike the hour. Because once in my life, for one instant, under grossest provocation, I let my temper master me, and I, an Englishman, acted like an Australian miner—because of that one savage impulse two lives were to be spoilt, two hearts were to be broken. I spent a night of agony deliberating this question, Eve. Mark you, it was within a few weeks of our wedding-day that your kindred with the dead man was first suggested to me."

"You knew that you had killed a fellow-creature?"

"Yes, I knew, and I had suffered all the bitterness of a long remorse; and I had given myself absolution.



And when I knew the worst, knew at least the probability that I had killed your brother, even then, after most earnest questioning, I told myself that it was best for both of us that we should marry. Our lives were our own. Neither of us was responsible to that dead man in his grave. But now, now that I see how dear he was to you, now that I know which way your heart turns, I wish to God that he had killed me, and that I were lying where he lies, among that quiet company by the lagune."

They were alone together, Lisa having slipped away, taking the boy with her, when she found the revelation inevitable. Let them fight it out, these two; and if this Englishwoman loved her dead brother better than her living husband, and chose to desert that noble husband, and thus show of what poor stuff she was made, there was Lisa who adored him, who would follow him through the world, if he would let her, with fidelity that neither time nor trouble could change.

Eve stood for a few moments mutely looking at the blurred photograph, the wretched production of an itinerant photographer's camera, in which one hand was out of focus, jointless, fingerless, monstrous. Poor as the image was, it brought back the days of her childhood as vividly as if it had been the finest work of art that Venice, in her golden age of Titian, Tintoret, and Veronese, could have produced. How well she remembered him! How dearly she had loved him! His holidays had been a season of boisterous gladness, his return to school or university a time of mourning. He had given interest and delight to all her childish amusements. He had taught her to ride. He had taught her to shoot



with an air-gun, which was one of his choicest possessions. He had taught her to serve at tennis, to play billiards on the worn-out table, where the balls rattled against the cushions as on cast iron. He had done all these things in a casual way, never sacrificing any inclination or engagement of his own to her pleasure—but in after days, when he had vanished out of her life, she knew not whither, it seemed to her that he had been the kindest and most unselfish of brothers. And he was dead, had been dead for years, cut off in the prime of his manhood by a remorseless hand. He was dead, and the man who had slain him stood before her, resolute, impenitent—her husband.

And the boy whose treble voice sounded now and again from the next room—the child from whose lightest contact she had shrunk with jealous abhorrence—that child was of her kindred, no matter how basely born. He was all that was left to her of the brother she had loved, and it was not for her to shrink from him.

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## CHAPTER XIII.

"'TIS NOT THE SAME NOW, NEVER MORE CAN BE."

VANSITTART was the first to break that agony of silence.

"Does this mean the end of love?" he asked. "Is all over and done with between you and me? Is love only a dream that we have dreamed?"

"Yes; it is a dream," she answered, looking at him with tearless eyes, which had more misery in them than all the tears he had ever seen in the eyes of women. "It is something perhaps to have believed oneself happy for two blessed years. You have been so good to me—so good to poor Peggy. She loved you almost as fondly as I did. You have been all goodness,—and you did not know that he was my brother. Yet, yet, when you killed him you must have known that some heart would be broken. No, I can never forget how good you have been—or how dear. Don't think that I can change in an hour from love to hate. No, no, that cannot be. To my dying day I must love you—but I cannot live with the man who killed my brother. I can never be your wife again. That is all over. We must be strangers on this side of the grave."

"A hard sentence, Eve; it could not be harder if I were a deliberate murderer. And yet perhaps it is no more than I deserve—perhaps even the gallows would be no more than my desert——"



"The gallows! Oh, God, could they kill you because——?"

The words died in her throat, choked by the agony of a great fear.

"But no one knows—no one will ever know," she cried. "She will never tell"—pointing to the door. "She loves you too dearly."

"No, she will not tell."

"Is there any one else who knows?"

"Only her aunt, who may be trusted. No, I don't think I am in any danger from the law," he said carelessly, as if that hardly mattered. "But you—you are my supreme judge; and you look upon me as a murderer. Well, perhaps you are right. Let me sophisticate with myself as I will, in that one moment I was in mind and instinct a homicide. When I struck that blow I did not care how deadly it might be. All the savage impulses within me were aroused. Yes, I was a murderer. And you say that we must part! That is your sentence?"

She bent her head in assent.

"Very well; then I must do all I can to make our parting easy and reputable. The world will wonder and talk, but we must bear that. I think I know a way of lessening the scandal. You will live at Merewood, and I will travel. That will make things easy."

"Live at Merewood without you! Not for all the world. I can go back to Fernhurst to my sisters. What does it matter where I live? The worst is that I *must* live. You will let me give them some of my pin-money, I know, so that I may not be an expense to them."



"Let you? Why, your pin-money is your own, to throw in the gutter if you like."

"No, no; it was meant for your wife. I shall have no claim upon it when we are parted. But I don't want to be a burden at the Homestead. I should like to give them fifty pounds a year. I shall not cost them so much as that."

"I dare say not. Why do you torture me with this talk of money? All the money I have is turned to withered leaves. Eve, Eve," he cried passionately, "you could not do this cruel thing if our child had lived!"

"Could I not? Would that have altered the fact that you killed my brother? No, Jack, for God's sake don't come near me," as he approached her with extended hand, trying to clasp her hand in his, passionately longing for reunion. "There is a ghost between us. I should hate myself if I could forget the dead."

"Ah, that is the worst sting of death," he cried bitterly, "the fatal influence of the dead which blights the living. Is there no hope, Eve—no hope? Is your mind made up?"

"Alas! alas! I have no alternative."

"Take time to think, at least, before you act."

"Time to think? Why, I have been thinking for an eternity. It is ages since that woman put this picture in my hand. If there were any truth in the stories of hair turning grey in some great agony mine ought to be as white as snow. Oh, I have thought, Jack. I have thought. If I could shut my eyes and say I forget—if I could say the past is past, and the dead are no better for our tears and our sacrifices, our crape



gowns, or the roses we plant on their graves—if I could be like the heathens who said, 'Let us be happy to-day, for to-morrow we die,' how gladly would I blot thought and memory from my brain! But you see while I live I must think and remember; and every hour of my life with you would be darkened by one hideous thought. I should see my brother in blood-stained winding-sheet standing between us. There are some things that cannot be, that heart, and mind, and conscience cry out against, and our marriage is one of those things. Oh, it was wicked, wicked, and cruel to marry me, knowing what you knew."

"Was it cruel? Was it wicked? If it was, I don't repent of that sin. I repent my first crime—the crime of bloodshed—not my second, the crime of making you my wife. I have had two years of bliss. How many men can say as much? Well, since you are resolute—have weighed what you are doing, and still decide against me, I will leave you in peace. If the memory of those years cannot plead for me, all words are idle."

She heard the strangled sob in his voice as he turned from her and went slowly to the door: but she did not call him back. She stood like a woman of stone till the door closed on him, and the outer door opened and shut again. Then she clasped her hands above her head with a distracted gesture, and rushed out upon the balcony to see the last of him. She leant over the high iron rail to watch him as he sprang into the waiting hansom. She saw him drive away, and did not shriek to him to come back, though her whole being, brain, heart, nerves, yearned after him, with the



wild yearning of despairing love. She watched till the cab vanished from her sight, hidden by the foliage on the Embankment, and then she dragged herself slowly back to the room, as a wounded animal crawls to its lair, and flung herself upon Lisa's sofa, a broken-hearted woman.

"Could I act otherwise,—could I, could I?" she asked herself. "My brother, my own flesh and blood! Even if I had not loved him, could I live with the man who killed him?"

Lisa crept into the room, while Eve sat sobbing, with her face hidden in the sofa pillow. Lisa crept to her side, and sat on the ground by her, pitying her, and looking up at her with mute dog-like tenderness.

"What have you done?" she asked at last. "Have you sent him from you—your husband who loves you?"

"Yes, he is gone. It is our fate."

"Fate!" cried Lisa, contemptuously. "What is fate? It is you, not Fate, that make the parting. If you loved him you would not let him go."

"If I loved him? Why, my whole being is made up of love for him."

"What then? And you send him from you for an accident—for something which no one could help. I was there—these eyes saw it—a moment and it was done. There was not time for thought. For that one instant of wrong-doing are you to make his life miserable?"

"He killed my brother. Do you understand that, Lisa? The man who ought to have been your husband was my brother. Did you care nothing for him—you, the mother of his child?"



"Si, si, I cared for him. When first he came to Burano I worshipped him as if he had been St. Mark. And when he said, 'Come to Venice with me, Lisa, and be my little wife,' I went. It was wicked, I know. I ought not to have left Burano till I had been to confession, and the priest had married us; but when I said, 'You will marry me, Signor Inglese,' he said, 'Yes, Lisa, by-and-by,' and that was what he always said till the last—'by-and-by.' He was not always kind to me, Si'ora, though he was your brother. He beat me sometimes when the luck had been bad at cards. When he had been sitting up half the night playing cards with his friends, and I crept into the room and begged him to play no more—he was not kind then. He would start up out of his chair, and swear a big English oath, and strike at me with his clenched fist. But am I sorry? Yes, of course I am sorry. It was dreadful to see him fall dead in a moment; but is that to be remembered against your husband years afterwards? He was brutal, so brutal that he deserved his death, almost. He flew at the strange Englishman like a tiger. He would not listen, he would not believe that I was not false to him. He was mad with drink and foolish anger. He was like a wild beast. And for an accident like that you would make the noblest of men unhappy. Ah, Si'ora, that is not love. If your husband belonged to me, and he loved me as he loves you, he might kill twenty men, and I would cling to him and love him still. What would their life be to me, or their death, if I had him?"

"You are a semi-civilized savage, and you can't



understand," said Eve, sternly. "Life and death, good name, and honour, have no meaning for you."

"Love means more than all," said Lisa, doggedly.

"There is only one man you have the right to love," said Eve; "the man who ought to have been your husband. You must be indeed a wretch if you can love the man who killed him."

"Ah, madonna mia, we do not make our hearts. They are made for us," Lisa pleaded naïvely. "The Signor Inglese was very good to me at Burano in my poverty; but afterwards, at Venice, I had a good deal to suffer. It was a hard life sometimes. One had need be young, and able to laugh, and forgive and forget. But he—Signor Vansittart—he was always kind. His face haunted me after that Shrove Tuesday on the Lido, and when we met again—when la Zia and I were strangers in London, without a friend in the world—oh, how kind and generous he was! All that I have of fame and fortune I owe to him, and though he does not care for me so much as that," with a contemptuous wave of her fingers, "yet he is always gentle, always good. Do not tell me that I am to care more for the dead man who deceived me and beat me than for the living man who has been my benefactor, my guardian angel, and for whom I say a paternoster and two aves every night of my life. It is sweet to say these for his sake: that his sin may be forgiven."

"Ah, you do not understand. You do not know what death is," said Eve, with gloomy anger, getting up from the sofa, and re-arranging her loosened hair with trembling hands.

"It must come to all of us," answered Lisa, with a



philosophical shrug. "Better that it should come in a moment as his came, without suffering, without fear, than that we should live to be old and fat and full of maladies. People die of dreadful diseases that one shudders only to hear of, and that is called a natural death. How much better to be stabbed to the heart unawares."

"I cannot reason with you," said Eve, haughtily. "I loved my brother. You, his mistress, evidently cared nothing for him."

And with this verbal stab, she departed. Who shall say whether she was more indignant with the Venetian for loving Harold Marchant too little or for loving John Vansittart too much?

Her carriage was waiting for her; the servants were asleep in the afternoon sun. She was only just able to utter the monosyllable "Home," in answer to the footman's question.

How strange the streets and all their movement of everyday life seemed to her, as she drove along the interminable King's Road, and by Sloane Street and the Park—how careless the faces of the people. Was there no other trouble in the world but her own? Was everybody else busy, and bustling, and happy? She felt as if she had been driving home from a funeral, wondering to find a world where there were no signs of sorrow. Had she not verily parted from her dead? The dead brother whom she had always pictured to herself as alive and happy in some far-off African wilderness, leading the adventurer's solitary life, caring for no one he had left in the civilized world, but destined to come back to her hereafter with that wild spirit tamed, and his boyish affections reviving with mature years. He



was dead, and she would see him no more on earth—killed in a tavern brawl, for the sake of a worthless woman. And the husband she adored, he, too, was dead—dead to her for ever. She had renounced him, and he was free to go his own way, and lead his own life, and find consolation and happiness where he could. Her friends of Mayfair had told her that no man laments long for the loss of any woman; that one beautiful face pushes aside another; that there is no image, however cherished, which does not grow faint, and fade and vanish, as a circle widens and melts away upon still water.

Even the house in Charles Street had a strange aspect when she re-entered it. Should she find him there? Would he plead with her again, in their own house, where she had been so happy with him, where all mute things reminded her of the glad life he had given her? Would he plead with her once more, and renew the agony of the struggle between love for the living and loyalty to the dead? No; she was spared that ordeal. The servant who opened the door told her that his master had been summoned hurriedly to Southampton, and had left a letter for her. She caught up the letter eagerly, hungry, in her desolation, for some sign from him, some last link between them.

“I start by the mail for Southampton,” he wrote. “Till nine I shall be within reach of a telegram at the Travellers, if you change your mind. Before to-morrow night I shall be outward bound; but till to-morrow night a wire to the Post Office at Southampton would find me. I have made no plans as yet, but you may think of me as an exile and a wanderer. I will send you tidings of



my whereabouts from time to time, so that, if ever you relent, you may call me back. I will go to you from the uttermost ends of the earth."

He was gone. She had been obeyed. The wrench was over; and now she had to face life calmly and deliberately without him. She had sacrificed all that was nearest and dearest to her on this earth to the shadow of the dead. She had made her choice between the dead and the living. Could she have chosen otherwise?

That was the question she asked herself when she had locked the door of her room and was alone with her misery, walking to and fro among the familiar surroundings which had been the background of a happy union. How could she have chosen otherwise?

"He killed him!" she repeated to herself with dogged insistency. "He killed my brother. What should I be if I could stay with him—call him husband, love him and obey him for the rest of my life—the man who killed my brother? Was it murder or not murder, he killed him. It was death. Oh, to think of my poor Harold—to think that he entered that fatal place in all the strength of his manhood; a young man, with a long life before him, perhaps; with all the chances of fortune and happiness which length of years can bring; and there in a moment he was breathing his last breath, stabbed to the heart!"

Memory recalled that fondly loved brother in the flush of his active boyhood—a cricket field shining in the sunlight, the white tents, the village crowd, and that tall, muscular form, the sunburnt face, blue eyes, and auburn hair, the type of English boyhood at its best.



One scene after another of her childhood passed before her as in a panorama, and Harold was the central figure in every picture. So strong, so brave, so intelligent, so kind to her always, even when at war with others; loving her to the last, even when an outcast from his home.

How cruelly Fate had used him—an unkind father—a forced exile—an early and a violent death!

For more than an hour—for an eternity of suffering—she paced her room—or knelt beside the bed, not praying, nor yet crying—only thinking, thinking of the life that had been and that was over for ever—her childish life in Yorkshire while her brother was still the cherished son, the honoured heir—the later season of disgrace and parting—her life with the husband of her love.

“And Peggy,” she thought, with a new agony of unavailing love, “oh, how good he was to my poor Peggy—no brother could have been kinder—but if she had known that the hand which smoothed her pillow was the hand that killed her brother—if she had known! Does she know now, I wonder, and know what I suffer, and pity me, from the far distance, in the land where there are no tears?”

She refused admittance to her maid at the usual hour of dressing. She told Benson that she had a headache, and would not go down to dinner. Later in the evening she wandered about the house, looking at the rooms in which she had been so happy—remembering the days of her courtship, when those rooms were still new to her, and when they realized all she had



ever imagined of luxury and refinement, an elegant simplicity which seemed an emanation of her mother-in-law's mind and character. She went about bidding the rooms good-bye, looking at them for the last time, as she believed, for she meant to depart on her journey early next morning.

To depart whither?

On thinking out the question of her future she rejected the notion of that return to the old home of which she had spoken to Vansittart.

She could not go to her sisters at Fernhurst, the refuge which she would instinctively have chosen, content to hide herself in the humble home of her girlhood, to live the old unluxurious life, to sit by the cottage hearth, and read the tattered old volumes of Scott, and Dickens, and Bulwer, and Thackeray, and try to think herself a girl again, a girl who had never seen the face of Jack Vansittart.

Fernhurst would not do. It was too near Lady Hartley; it was not remote enough from Merewood. She had to find some abiding place which should be unknown to all the world except the servant who went with her. She did not feel herself equal to travelling without a servant. The ways of luxury had spoiled her for the ways of independence. She was no longer the same young woman who used to head an early expedition from Haslemere to Waterloo, travelling third class, among soldiers and workmen, to be first in the scramble for bargains at a sale of drapery. She felt herself powerless, in her bruised and broken state, to face the confusion of a crowded railway station, the bewilder-



ment of foreign travel, with its stringent demands upon the traveller's calmness and intelligence.

She found her good Benson waiting for her in her boudoir dressing-room with a tea-tray, and a meal of cold chicken, fruit and jelly, set out temptingly to beguile her into eating.

"You have had nothing since lunch, ma'am."

"I can't eat anything—yes," as Benson looked distressed, "some bread and butter. You can leave that and the tea—but take away all the rest, please. And then give me Bradshaw—and I want you to pack before you go to bed. It is not very late, is it?"—looking hopelessly at the watch on her chatelaine, but unable to see the quaint old figures with those tired eyes.

"Past eleven, ma'am; but I can pack to-night, if you like. Are we to leave early to-morrow?"

Eve turned the leaves of Bradshaw before she answered, and pored over a page for a few minutes.

"The Continental train leaves Charing Cross at eight," she said.

"Then I must certainly pack to-night, ma'am. Shall I take many dresses—evening gowns—tea-gowns? Shall you be going out much in the evenings?"

"I shan't be going out at all. Take my plainest walking gowns, and, yes, a tea-gown or two; one black evening gown will do. Take plenty of things. I shall be abroad a long time."

"It is very sudden, ma'am," faltered Benson, who was honestly fond of her mistress.

"Yes, it is very sudden. You must not ask me any questions. You must take it on trust that there is nothing wrong in my life."



"Oh, ma'am, I should never think that, whatever happened. I know you too well. Are we going to join Mr. Vansittart on the Continent?"

"No, Benson. We are going away from him. Mr. Vansittart and I have parted for ever. Please don't speak of it to any one down-stairs. I want to avoid all talk and scandal. I tell you because you are going with me. You will share in my new life—if you like to go."

"I would go to the end of the world with you, ma'am. But, dear, dear, dear, to think that you and Mr. Vansittart can be parted—you who have been so happy together, like children almost! It can only be a temporary misunderstanding. I am sure of that."

"Benson, if you wonder and talk about my trouble I shall go alone. Can't you understand that there are griefs that won't bear to be spoken of? Mine is one of them. I am going abroad; I hardly know where as yet. To some quiet place in Brittany or Normandy most likely, where I can just exist."

"Oh, my dear young lady, you will kill yourself with grief," sobbed Benson, as she poured out tea for her mistress.

While Benson was packing, with all the dexterity and method of an accomplished packer, Eve was employed in writing the most difficult letter she had ever written in her life.

She was writing to her husband's mother, the woman who had received her at first reluctantly, but afterwards with motherly affection; the woman who had surrendered the son she adored to the wife he had chosen for himself, and who looked to that wife for the happiness of



her son's future years. Penniless, the daughter of a disreputable father, with no social surroundings or family influence to recommend her, she had been accepted by Jack Vansittart's relations; petted and praised by his sister; lovingly cherished by his mother; and for recompense of their trust in her what was she going to give them?

She was going to spoil her husband's life in the heyday of youth and love; to leave him bound in wedlock and yet companionless; with a wife and no wife. He could not divorce her; she could not divorce him. His sin was not of the kind which breaks marriage bonds.

What could she say to her mother-in-law which could in any manner explain or justify the parting of husband and wife who until yesterday had been living together in seemingly happiest union? There was no explanation, no justification possible. The mystery of those two broken lives and broken hearts must remain for ever dark to their kindred and the world.

"My husband and I have agreed to part, and our parting must needs be for a lifetime," she wrote. "We can tell no one our reasons, not even you, mother, who of all people have the strongest right to question us. Unfaithfulness or lessening love has nothing to do with our separation. I never loved my husband better than I love him now; or, at least, I never knew the strength of my love for him so well as I know it now. What must be must be. It is Fate, and not our own will, that divides us. Wherever he may go my heart goes with him. Think of me with indulgence if you can; pity me if you can, for I have direst need of your pity."



She said nothing about her destination. She had not made up her mind yet where she was to go. She sat for an hour or more turning the leaves of the Continental time-table; now thinking she would go by Ostend, and to the Ardennes; and then again deciding upon Brittany. It mattered nothing to her where she went; all places were alike, except for her desire to avoid the people she knew.

Finally she decided upon crossing to St. Malo by the boat that left Southampton at five o'clock next day; and from St. Malo to Dinan or Avranches. She would avoid the seaside, where English visitors would be likely to be met at this season. The Norman and Breton towns she knew by repute as places where people lived quietly and economically, forgotten by the world.

The same post which brought Mrs. Vansittart Eve's letter from London brought her a letter from her son, written from Southampton.

"You will be surprised at the address from which I write, and still more surprised when I tell you that Southampton is only the first stage on my journey to South Africa. I sail from here to the Cape, and from thence shall make my way to whichever portion of the Dark Continent promises best for health and enjoyment at this time of year. Do not be uneasy about me, my dear mother. I shall take counsel with experienced travellers before I turn my back upon the civilized world; and I shall not go to meet fever, famine, or assassination. You shall hear from me at each stage of my wanderings. I do not go as a scientific explorer, or as a sportsman in quest of big game, though I hope



to make good use of my gun. I go with the desire to escape from civilization, monotony, and my own thoughts, which just now are of the saddest.

“A cloud has spread itself between Eve and me, and we two, who were so happy in each other’s affection a little while ago, have agreed to part, I fear never again to live together. I cannot tell you our reasons, for they involve a secret the revelation of which would be disastrous to me—the only secret I ever kept from you. Eve is blameless—chaste and faithful as in the beginning of our wedded lives. I implore you to think of her always with affection; to shelter and cherish her if ever she appeal to your love or claim your protection. She is entitled to your respect and to your pity. The only sinner—never a deliberate sinner—is your son, who in his shattered domestic life pays the forfeit of one unhappy act.”

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## CHAPTER XIV.

## A DOUBLE EXILE.

HAIL, dark mother of wanderers, parched nurse of lions! Amidst thy sandy wilderness grief and dishonour may forget themselves; with thee man is only man! He leaves that other half of himself, reputation, yonder in the crowd, and in these solitudes becomes a creature of thews and sinews, valuable only for his strength and endurance, for the range of his eye and the truth of his hand. He has done with the outward shows of life, and with all nice differences between good and bad. Here, worth is to be measured by the hunter's fleetness of foot, and honour by the marksman's aim. What a man is counts for but little; what he can do for much. In that aching misery which possessed him when he left England, John Vansittart looked to the desert as his best refuge. The hunter's life in Mashonaland gives scanty leisure for brooding over the ruins of a home in England. The early trek with the waggon, or the start on foot from the skerm; the hard day's tramp under the blazing sun; the need of providing meat for the boys—the long following on the spoor of giraffe or antelope, with the wild ride or cautious stalk at the end—which that need involves; the charm of the life, its poetry, its absolute novelty, and the ever-recurring vicissitudes which each new day brings forth, leave the



head of the expedition briefest time for introspective thought. His slumbers are for the most part dreamless; or his dreams are of lions prowling by the camp-fire, or of the dark forms and wild gestures of those he has last seen dancing by its flickering light; not of the lost faces of home. Best of all, his conscience is at ease, for face to face with man in his most primitive aspect he loses the habit of weighing his past acts and comparing, with futile regret, the things he has done with the things he ought to have done.

For Vansittart there could have been no better refuge than the desert.

Here, if his heart wounds were not healed, his consciousness of sin was deadened. Here, where no exaggerated value was set on human life, he could remember Harold Marchant's death with less intensity of pain. Here, where the native freely turned his gun or his assegai against his fellow-man, a mischance such as that of Florian's Caffè seemed a small thing—the fortune of war, a spurt of anger, an unlucky blow, and there an end. Every man must die somehow; and it may not be the worst doom to drop down in the fullness of youth and vigour, knowing not the slow agonies of gradual extinction, the torture of dying by inches.

Vansittart's thoughts were tempered by his surroundings. His character took new colours in that vivid life, in that lapse backward from the civilized and the complicated to the primitive stage of man's history. It was as if Time had turned his glass and the earth were young. The wild race of Cain, the outcast, could have been no wilder than these woolly haired followers of his, who were faithful to him because he was a good shot.



Nature, the great consoler, helped him to forget his grief by forgetting himself. Here, face to face with Nature's mightiest forces, man's sense of his own personality dwindles to the faintest shadow in the vastness of his surroundings. Instead of Trafalgar Square he has the Falls of the Zambesi; instead of the languid club lounge he has the elephant and the lion for his companions—the purring growl of the lion instead of the gossip of the smoking-room; the trumpet of the elephant instead of the chatter of the dinner-table. Surely it is good for a man to be alone in the wilderness—alone save for the company of followers to whom, though he be their leader, he is as another being, a white man, a stranger in their land, between whose thoughts and feelings and their own a great gulf is forever fixed. It is good for him to feel his own insignificance among men who value him only for his powder and shot, and who will lose their reverence for his white superiority with the spending of his last cartridge. Here he must needs forget that pride of place which at home was a part of his being. Here there are no tradesmen to fawn upon him, no servants to touch their hats to him, no women to praise him. Small food for vanity here, where the darkies call his smooth, flat hair dog's hair, and who liken his hairy arm to a baboon's arm. Here if the women fawn upon him it is not for his smiles or his favour, but for beads or printed calico, such vivid orange or scarlet fabrics, figured with stars or half moons, as Manchester weaves for the Torrid Zone. Here if the men are true to him it is because he can feed them and pay them. He is



in a world of stern facts, where sentiment and sophistication are unknown.

The atmosphere suits him. The primitive interests of this primitive life help to shut off that other life where all is gloom, the life of thought and of memory. Sufficient for the day, that is the motto here: food for the day; safety for the day; wood for the fires, water for man and beast. Beside them, behind them, ahead of them, stalk dangers that Europe knows not. Danger from beasts of prey; danger from men as cruel; fever, starvation, death in many shapes—all the vicissitudes of a life between the desert and the sky.

Fortune favours him in his desolation of spirit. A happier man might have been less lucky. A man more careful of his life, with more to live for, might have hardly escaped scot-free from all the dangers of the hunter's life in an unknown land. Travellers far more experienced wondered afterwards when they heard the story of this man's travels, and the impunity with which he had done desperate things.

His daring had been the audacity of ignorance, they said. If he had known the extent of the peril in such unconsidered wanderings, with so small a party, with such inadequate preparation, he would have been a madman to set his life upon such chances. Had he answered them truthfully he would have told them that he was a madman when he turned his face towards the desert; mad with the agony of a life that was blighted; mad with the bitter memories of lost happiness.

Of these wedded lovers, parted in the noontide of



their love, one carried his wounded heart to the wilderness, and sought for tranquillity of spirit in a life of movement and peril; the other, the weaker vessel, had no such large resources. The life of adventure, the ever-changing horizon, were not for her. She could only creep to some quiet haven and sit alone and brood upon her grief.

She went first to Avranches; then late in the autumn she took a fancy to the solitude of Mont St. Michel, the quaint monastic citadel, the fortress on the rock; and here, when the last of the tourists had gone, and the equinoctial gales were roaring fiercely round the Gothic towers, she took up her abode in an apartment specially prepared for her by the cheery patronne of the Inn at the Gate, an apartment upon the ramparts, with windows looking wide over the sea towards Coutances and Jersey.

Benson, who had a constitution of iron, complained bitterly of this wind-swept rock, yet had to own later that her health had never been better. Eve stopped here late into the winter, sketching a little, reading a great deal, wandering on the sands in all weathers, and sometimes wishing that her footsteps would take her unawares to that portion of the bay, where, as in the Kelpie's flow, sorrow might find a grave.

An imprudent ramble in the marshy fields between Pontorson and the Mount, which left her belated in the mists of a November evening, resulted in congestion of the lungs. She had contrived to lose herself among those salt meadows as completely as ever her husband had lost himself in Mashonaland, and it was eleven o'clock when she and her whimpering attendant tottered



along the causeway leading to the gates of the fortress, footsore and weary, their shoes worn out in that long tramp over coarse grass and sandy hillocks.

Benson telegraphed to Miss Marchant at Fernhurst, and Sophy appeared on the scene as quickly as boat and rail, and a wretched fly from Avranches, with harness eked out by bits of rope, could bring her. Sophy was broken-hearted at this cruel turn which her sister's bright fortunes had taken, and agonized with remorseful retrospection. It was she, perhaps, whose imprudent tongue had parted husband and wife, had destroyed that happy home. Sophy hated herself for the folly of that revelation. Why could she not have let well alone? Why could she not have left undisturbed that happy state of things by which she herself had profited so richly? Looking back upon her conduct of that fatal week, she saw that it was her own disappointment which had soured her, and her own selfish vexation which had made her so angry with Vansittart.

It was a long time before Eve was well enough for serious talk of any kind. She rallied slowly, and during the monotonous days of her convalescence she was treated as a child, who must only hear smooth and pleasant things; but when she was well again, quite well, save for that little hacking cough, which seemed to have become an element of her being, Sophy ventured to approach the subject of her domestic sorrows.

"I have been utterly miserable since that day I left Charles Street," said Sophy, seated beside Eve's easy-chair, and resting her forehead on the cushioned arm



as she talked, so that her face was invisible. "I have hated myself for speaking of your husband as I did—only upon hearsay. After all, Mr. Sefton might have misinterpreted Jack's conduct. It might all have been a mistake."

"It was a mistake, Sophy."

"Oh, I am so glad. You found out at once, that Mr. Sefton was wrong."

"Yes."

"Thank God! But then"—looking up at her sister in blank astonishment—"if that is so, why are you parted, Jack and you?"

"That is our secret, Sophy."

"But why, but why? I can't understand. There could be only one reason for your leaving him when you loved him so dearly. Nothing but the knowledge of his infidelity would justify——"

"Stop, Sophy," said Eve, peremptorily. "There is nothing gained by speculating about other people's business. My husband and I have our own reasons for taking different roads. We have never quarrelled; we have never ceased to care for each other. I shall love him with all my heart, and mind, and strength, till my last breath."

"I guess your reason," answered Sophy, nodding sagaciously. "He is an Atheist, and you, who have always been a good Churchwoman, could not go on living with an unbeliever. You are like poor Catherine in 'Robert Elsmere.'"

"Oh, Sophy, do you think I should forsake him because he was without hope or comfort from God? Why



do you tease me with foolish guesses? I tell you again the reason of our parting is our secret. A secret that will go down with me to the grave."

Sophy's eager imagination ran riot in the world of mystery. Politics, Freemasonry, Hypnotism, Theosophy, Nihilism, hereditary madness, epilepsy, hydrophobia, a family ghost, a family fatality! That lively mind of hers touched each possibility, rejected each, and flew off to the next; and lastly, with a sigh of relief, she exclaimed—

"I am more thankful than I can say that it was not my imprudent tongue which parted you."

An hour later, walking alone on the ramparts, she told herself that in all probability this desolate wife was only throwing dust in her eyes, and that Vansittart's inconstancy had been clearly demonstrated in accordance with Sefton's story. It would be only like a devoted wife to violate truth in order to vindicate her husband. Pride and love would alike urge Eve to deny her husband's infidelity.

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## CHAPTER XV.

"O TELL HER, BRIEF IS LIFE, BUT LOVE IS LONG."

As soon as Eve was well enough to be moved she left the rock and went to finish the winter at Dinard. The doctor who attended her through her illness suggested the south of France, Cannes for instance, as the better climate for her; but she told him she had lost a sister at Cannes, that the whole Riviera was associated with her loss.

"It is very lovely," she said; "but I shall never go there again. My sister was sent there because she was consumptive; but my case is altogether different. It would be absurd to go to the south just because I have had a touch of congestion, in consequence of an autumnal ramble."

"It was a rather severe touch, madam," said the doctor; "but perhaps Dinard may suit you very well. There are some people who say the climate is almost as good as Provence."

Sophy went with her sister to Dinard, which she pronounced a considerable improvement upon Mont St. Michel, the mediævalism of which picturesque settlement had in no wise reconciled her to the dismal solitude of a place without people and without shops. At Dinard there were smart residents even in winter, and if Eve had not been obstinately bent upon isolation



they might have known people, as Sophy murmured regretfully.

Not knowing people, she soon wearied of Dinard, which was only the sands and the sea over again, when one had exhausted the town and the quaintness of shops which were unlike English shops, and had explored St. Malo and St. Servant, and excursionized, chaperoned by Benson, as far as Dinan, where she was more impressed by the bad drainage than by the fine architecture.

Sophy began to talk of her home duties. Jenny's letters had been most exasperating of late, and it was too evident she was interfering with Nancy, and making a mess of the housekeeping. Finally Sophy declared that things at Fernhurst could go on no longer without her. Jenny had been entertaining in a most reckless manner—people to luncheon, people to tea. "She will be giving dinner-parties next," said Sophy. "Nancy is so weak about her, because she saved her life in the measles—as if it was any merit of Jenny to have had measles worse than the rest of us."

Eve did not oppose her departure, being somewhat weary of that light talk which centred chiefly in self, one's own experiences, sensations, hopes, disappointments.

"How I wish you would go back with me, Eve," urged Sophy, with very real warmth. "Surely you would be happier at Fernhurst than here, and it would be like the old days for us to have you again. You would be one of us, the head of the family once more. You would forget that you had ever left home."

"Ah, Sophy, if that were possible! If any one



could forget! They can't, dear. They only harden their hearts and call it forgetting. Dear old Fernhurst! Yes, I should love to be there; to ramble over Blackdown again, and hear the wind whistling in the dark fir trees; to look over the weald far off to the faint streak of distant sea, just a patch of light on the horizon and no more. But it can't be done, Sophy. Fernhurst is too near Redwold Towers, too near Mr. Sefton's place, too near all the people I have done with."

"Poor Eve, it is sad to hear you talk of yourself as an exile, as if you had committed a crime. It was most trying when Mrs. Vansittart came over to see us, and questioned us so closely about you. Did we think this or that? Had we known of any unhappiness between you and Jack? Had we any idea why you parted? I felt it more than the others, for I thought I was at the bottom of it all with my foolish speech about your husband. But I held my tongue. The others declared they knew nothing, could not even surmise a reason for your conduct. They adored Jack, thought him simply perfect as a husband, and Eve the luckiest girl of their acquaintance. And then there was Lady Hartley. Of course we had to go through the same kind of thing with her, not once but several times, for she is always nice in asking us to her house, and in coming to tea with us every now and then, and I know that she is very fond of you, in her light-minded way. But, indeed, Eve, I don't see any reason why you should not go home with me. Nobody will venture to question you, and as Jack is in Africa——"



"No, no; I could not bear to see the people I know, or the old places. I should be miserable. I see them often in my dreams—hill and common, and lane, and cottage garden, and wake disappointed to find myself so far away. But I could not bear to be there again—without him. No, dear. Jack is travelling, and I am travelling. That is much the best arrangement."

"But you don't travel," remonstrated Sophy. "You bury yourself alive in a place like this, and walk up and down the same stretch of sand every day, or tramp along the same chalky road, or cross the same ridiculous ferry, and march round the same windy ramparts. Surely you don't call that travelling."

"I mean to do better by-and-by. I mean to go to Italy. Perhaps you would spare me Hetty for a travelling companion?"

"Spare her, indeed! You have but to ask her, and she will spare herself. She won't ask my leave. She is pining for a change. She even wanted to go into a convent by way of variety. She would think nothing of going over to Rome; and if you take her to Italy you will have to be very careful that the priests don't get hold of her."

"I will take care of her, Sophy. Benson and I will keep the priests at bay. Benson is a dragon of Protestantism."

It was settled that Hester should meet Eve and her maid in Paris early in April, and that they should travel from that city, slowly and at their ease, by Basle and Lucerne to Milan, and thence to the Italian lakes, or possibly to Venice. Eve trembled as she spoke the name of that fatal city. She had a morbid longing to



go there, to look upon her brother's grave before she died. She could afford to indulge any fancy in the way of travelling, for the pin-money sent her quarterly by the trustee to her marriage settlement was sufficient for her wants, and over and above this private income of hers the trustee, who was also her husband's solicitor, sent her a hundred and fifty pounds quarterly, in accordance with Mr. Vansittart's parting instructions. She had protested against this extra allowance, assuring the solicitor that the income under her settlement was sufficient for her maintenance, and the solicitor had replied that he was instructed to furnish her with six hundred a year during his client's absence from Europe, and that as his client was in Africa, beyond the reach of letters, it was impossible to depart from his instructions. Eve was thus richer than her needs, and was able to be generous to the sisters, whose letters informed her of the result of her bounty, in the shape of a much smarter style of living at the Homestead. They had a page to open the door; they dined at eight o'clock, and always had dessert on the table. They had their afternoon; and carriages—chiefly pony—came from far distances to take tea with them, Jenny assured her sister.

"Your marriage lifted us all out of the mire," wrote Jenny; "but it is too sad to think of Jack in Africa and you a broken-hearted wanderer. It is awfully sad, and we can none of us guess the why or the wherefore. We feel that there must be some terrible secret. No light reason could have parted you. Mr. Sefton is at the Manor, hunting every day, and going long distances by rail when there are no hounds in the neighbourhood. We hear he has been paying attentions to Lord Haver-



stock's only daughter, who will be enormously rich. No doubt he will end by marrying for money. Poor Sophy turned deadly pale the first Sunday she saw him in church. We were earlier than usual, and we were seated in our pew as he came up the nave, staring about him as coolly as if he had been in a theatre."

With Hetty for her travelling companion, Eve felt more her own mistress, and, therefore, happier than she had felt with Sophy. Hetty was only fifteen, and might be treated as a child, and, indeed, she still possessed some of the best attributes of childhood; was incurious about the future save when it promised some novelty, change of place, new possession, amusement or excitement; was deeply interested in trifles, and had no margin of mind to give to serious things.

Such a companion may do much for a heart weighed down by the burden of unavailing regret. Hetty, when allowed to give full scope to her own absorbing individuality, left very little room for any one else's feelings. Her delight in travelling was so intense as to be almost contagious. Everything interested her, and the newness of things was a perpetual surprise. She paused in her raptures only to pity the people who are doomed never to travel. She kept a list of the towns through which she passed, were it only sitting in a railway carriage. She had brought the shabby old family atlas from the Homestead, and had it open on her lap in the railway carriage, poring over it till her eyes ached, and rarely able to find the place she was looking for in that pale and faded type.

They stopped a couple of nights at Basle, where



the Rhine was rapture. They stopped a week at the Schweizerhof, and exhausted the drives and excursions about Lucerne, and explored the lake of the Forest Cantons, and climbed the Righi, and did all that the veriest Cockney tourist can do, personally conducted by Hetty, who read her Baedeker every morning, and gave her sister no rest till the day's excursion had been settled upon.

"Sophy said I was not to let you brood," explained Hetty. "I was to take care you went about and enjoyed the scenery."

Eve went about uncomplainingly, first to please Hetty, and next because days and weeks must be got rid of somehow, and sorrow must keep moving by day if it would court a few hours' respite by night. Eve had her little cough still—only a little cough; but the experienced Benson heard that dull, hacking sound with some anxiety, remembering poor Peggy's chance, and how little it had done for her. Would it ever come to that pass with her young mistress, Benson wondered? Was the fatal strain in the blood of all these fair sisters, with their transparent complexions and hectic bloom? Half a year ago Eve had seemed in exuberant health, as well as in exuberant spirits, the fairest type of youthful womanhood, dancing along the flowery path of life with foot so light as never to touch the thorns, or disturb the snake asleep in the sun. The parting with the man she adored had changed her whole being, and the sound of her laughter was heard no more, despite of the lively Hetty's provocations to mirth.

They went from Lucerne to Como, and lingered in that enchanting region until the midsummer heat drove



them into the mountains. They roughed it in the Dolomites till October, and then went down to Lake Lemman, and established themselves for the winter at Lausanne, where Eve took her sister's education seriously in hand, and placed her as day-boarder in a very superior establishment "to be finished." Here they lived very quietly, Hetty interested in her work, and improving herself with a rapidity which astounded her mistresses, who had been scandalized at her benighted condition from the educational point of view, and who had not yet grasped the idea that a girl who has led a free out-of-door life until she is fifteen years old has a stock of brain power that makes education a much easier business for her between that age and twenty than it is for the hapless victim of premature culture, who has been straining and exhausting the growing brain ever since she was five.

Hetty revived her juvenile French, and took to German and Italian as readily as to loto or go-bang. Eve was delighted with her progress, and felt she was doing some good in the world; and for Hetty's sake she stayed at Lausanne, with only a summer holiday in the Jura until the second winter of her exile, when by her English doctor's advice she went up to St. Moritz, Hetty, who was growing a very lovely girl, accompanying her, and turning the heads of all the young men at the Kulm Hotel, most especially when she played one of poor Samary's characters in a little French duologue with the all-accomplished Dr. Holland.

Home letters told Eve that Vansittart was still in Africa, and that his mother was living very quietly at Merewood. From that lady, directly, Eve had not heard



of late. She had answered her daughter-in-law's letter coldly and cruelly, as it seemed to Eve.

"I cannot enter into your domestic mystery," she wrote. "I only know that you took my son's life into your keeping, and that you have wrecked it. He was the only son of his mother, and she was a widow. We were very happy together till you crossed his path; and now he is an exile, and I do not even know the reason of his banishment. Forgive me if I say I wish he had never seen your face."

Lord Haverstock's daughter was now the Honourable Mrs. Sefton, and her husband was said to have secured the highest matrimonial prize in Sussex. The lady's aristocratic features had the stamp of a shrewish temper, as plainly as ever a knife was stamped "Sheffield." She was proud of her birth and of her money, and a lesser man than Wilfred Sefton would have had a bad time with her, but he was reported to be more than equal to the situation. They entertained enormously, and were considered an acquisition to the neighbourhood. The Miss Marchants had been bidden to all their parties, and Sophy's cheerful tone in describing the high jinks at the Manor showed that she had outlived her disappointment.

"Everybody knows that he married for money and position," concluded Sophy, after a graphic account of a New Year's dance given by Mrs. Sefton, "and everybody admires the way he manages his wife. He is obviously supreme in everything. If he had married a curate's daughter he could not be more completely the master, although her income is nearly treble his, and



they are always buying land, either adding to the Liswold estate, or creeping over the county in other directions. They have no heir as yet, or promise of an heir, which is a disappointment to Lord Haverstock, who wanted a grandson immediately. I don't believe it is possible to imagine a more unhappy marriage, looked at from our point of view; but as, in my opinion, he never had a heart, in spite of his folly about the Venetian singer, it is just the kind of marriage to suit him.

"Lady Hartley's last baby is perfection—a girl—and I am asked to be godmother, a great compliment considering her extensive circle and what snobs people are.

"Nancy sends you her dear love, and wants me to tell you that she always uses the lovely carved workbox, with the sleeping lion on the lid, which you sent her from Lucerne.

"Shall I secure you a few remnants at Marshall's or Robinson's before the January sales are over? You must pay outrageous prices for everything in Switzerland."

So much for news from home. The London papers afforded ample information about Signora Vivanti, who pursued her successful career unchecked, and rose a step or so in public estimation with each new part she created—"created" was the word the critics used of this uncultured islander's impersonations. She had fresh whims, and eccentricities, and gaieties for each new character. She was *peuple* to the marrow of her bones, and she had all the cleverness and unflagging pleasure in life which belongs to the populace. London audiences adored her, and to provincial audiences she came as a revelation of what gaiety of heart really means. She



seemed a well-spring of joyousness, and sent her audience home convinced that life was not so very dreary after all.

Could Eve have known more than the newspapers told her she would have known that the Signora was keeping herself what Mr. Hawberk called "straight." Slander had not breathed upon her name. She had loved, and her love had been rejected; and from the hour of that rejection she had concentrated her affections upon that which never betrays or disappoints. Lisa and her aunt found the chief delight of their lives in the scraping and self-denial which enabled them to add to their hoard.

Lisa no longer bought diamonds, and wore her whole fortune upon her neck and arms. The diamonds were a very delightful form of investment, but the elementary theory of principal and interest had been gradually borne in upon her mind, and she now knew enough of finance to know that she ought to get something for her money. Reluctantly, and with serious misgivings, she followed the advice of her manager and opened a deposit account at the Union Bank, whither her light feet tripped gaily once a week, and where she handed in the major part of her salary to a clerk who could scarcely write the receipt under the too near radiance of those dazzling eyes.

Life was so cheap for two abstemious women and one little boy. Vansittart had paid three years' rent of the flat in advance before he left Southampton. Lisa and la Zia were on velvet, and while the deposit account was growing there came offers from America, which were intoxicating in their liberality. American agents



had seen and heard the lovely Venetian; Anglo-American newspapers had written about her talents and her beauty; and the always enterprising agent-in-advance was eager to introduce her to the Western world.

Lisa carried the tempting offers to her London manager, who shrugged his shoulders, and raised her salary, for the sixth or seventh time.

"You will ruin me if I try to keep you, Signora," he said; "but I can't afford to lose you."

The prima donna and her aunt used to sit over their handful of fire in the small hours after a cheap but savoury supper of liver, or some other abomination, chopped up in a seething mass of macaroni, reeking of garlic and of grease. There was no dish the smartest restaurant in London could have provided that they would have enjoyed better than their native kitchen. They came of a people who can make a feast out of a morsel of meat which the sturdy British workman would toss to his dogs. Their luxuries and their pleasures were alike of the cheapest. A jaunt to Greenwich or Kew by river, a long day roaming about the Crystal Palace, idle afternoons on the grassy levels of Battersea Park, basking in the sunshine while Paolo made pies in the sand. Pleasures as simple as these sufficed for Lisa, while her fortune was growing at the Union Bank. By the kind manager's advice she had invested the bulk of her wealth in railway shares, to which she had added from time to time as her deposit account grew. She had at first been very chary of trusting the railway with her savings, preferring to confide in the Bank, which looked solid and respectable, but on being assured that



she would get better interest from the railway with equal security, she consented to become a shareholder. It was pleasant when sitting with her aunt in a third-class carriage on the way to Windsor or Richmond to be able to remind that good lady that she, Lisa, was part owner of the carriage, and indeed of the whole line.

Economical as the two women were their parsimony never degenerated into meanness. If their fare was humble they were always ready to share it with a friend. Little Zinco, who was an old bachelor, dined with his pupil every Sunday, la Zia devoting the whole morning, after an early Mass in the chapel near Sloane Street, to the preparation of a little bit of beef stuffed with raisins, and a mess of rice and cheese, while Lisa in her best gown, escorted by the faithful Zinco, attended Mass at the Oratory or the Pro-Cathedral.

In their after-midnight talk by the fire, when autumnal or wintry nights made a fire a necessity, Lisa and la Zia built their castle in the air, and that castle was a small house on the Giudecca, a house of which they could let a couple of floors, reserving the piano nobile, or upper story, with its fine views over the blue water, for themselves, and furnishing the same gorgeously with carved chestnut wood and inlaid black wood, from one of the big manufactories on the Grand Canal. Here they were to live happily ever after, when once Fiordelisa had earned an income that would maintain them for the rest of their days, and pay for Paolo's education.

Already he had shown a passionate love of music,



and Zinco saw in him the makings of a fine opera singer.

"He will be handsome, he will be big," said the 'cello, "and already at five years old he shows me that he has an ear as true as a bird's, or as yours. You will send him to the Conservatorio at Milan as soon as he is old enough to enter, and he will find his fortune in his larynx as you have."

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## CHAPTER XVI.

### "A SCENE OF LIGHT AND GLORY."

It was April, the third springtime after the parting of the wedded lovers, and to Eve it seemed as if many years had come and gone since she had looked upon her husband's face. She had endured her life somehow, a life of mornings and afternoons, of twilight and sunrise, of moons that waxed or waned, of seasons that changed from hot to cold and back again, a life like a squirrel's wheel, and having nothing in common with that happy wedded life in which her eyes opened every morning upon joy and love—the joy of knowing the beloved companion near, the love which seemed ever near and ever growing.

Hetty had been a comfort to her in all that time, and had shown herself so sympathetic that Eve had resolved never to part with her, except to a husband; and, as yet, among Hetty's numerous admirers there had been no one whom she cared for as a future husband. So far Hetty was heart-whole and devoted to her sister, more than ever devoted, alas! now, when the red flag of phthisis flaunted upon Eve's hollow cheeks, the too visible sign which indicated the beginning of the end.

She had borne up bravely in those years of exile, making the best of life in some of earth's pleasantest



places, courting cheerfulness for her young sister's sake, and never wearing her widowed heart upon her sleeve. She had borne up bravely, though the enemy had been at work all the time, and the fatal hereditary strain which had developed so early in Peggy, showed itself in Eve by occasional illnesses, through which she battled successfully, with the aid of much careful nursing by the skilled Benson and the devoted Hetty. They had patched her up time after time, as Benson told her compatriot courier-maids in the courier's room at the hotel, but the day was coming when patching would no longer serve—the frail frame and the brave spirit must yield to the inevitable.

“Well, it'll have to come to all of us, in our time,” said Benson, brushing away a tear or two, “but it seems hard it should come to her before she's six-and-twenty. So pretty, too, and such a sweet disposition. It'll be a long time before I shall get a mistress I shall like as well, though when I first took the place I thought I should find it strange like, after being used only to titled people. But there, we're all human, and there ain't much difference between a plain country gentleman's wife and a duchess when you're putting a linseed poultice on her chest.”

In the bright April weather Eve and her sister came to Venice, the city to which all Eve's thoughts had been bending ever since she left England, nearly three years before. She had always meant to go there, always wished to look upon the scene of her brother's untimely death, and to kneel beside his nameless grave before she died; but she had shrunk with an indescribable



dread from the accomplishment of her desire, her heart aching even at the thought of the pain it must cost her to look upon that place, which was associated with all her misery.

Hetty had talked about Venice very often in her ignorance of all painful associations, and Eve had put her off with promises. "Yes, dear, I mean to go there, sooner or later;" and Hetty hung over the coloured plan in Baedeker—the blue canal, with its curious serpentine curve—and longed to be there with all the intensity which pertains to the juvenile side of twenty. Venice, a name to conjure with! She repeated those lines of Rogers', the plain unvarnished statement—"There is a glorious city by the sea; the sea is in the broad, the narrow streets"—which brings that wonder-city before the eye of the mind far more vividly than all the fire and fervour of Byron, or the word-painting of Dickens and Howells.

And now, now, in the beginning of the end, Eve knowing there was no time to lose, the sisters were here in the spring sunset, their gondola moving with the smooth, delicious motion which serves as a balm for troubled spirits, a cure for all the agitations of life, moving in and out of the labyrinthine rios, as the hansom cabman of Venice takes his short cut to the Riva degli Schiavoni, and the comfortable hostelry of Danieli, where at Benson's advice rooms had been secured on the entresol facing the water, Benson professing familiarity with almost every hotel in Europe. She had stayed at Danieli's with her Duchess, stayed there for a month, occupying the piano nobilissimo, in the most palatial wing of that patchwork of palaces,



where the traveller may either find himself ushered into the mediæval splendour of a kingly chamber, or may be conducted by a labyrinth of passages to a garret looking out upon a slum that recalls St. Giles's. The wise traveller, of course, is he who gives Danieli ample notice of his coming, and for him the noble floors are reserved.

The entresol was cosy rather than palatial; the rooms were spacious, although low; and the windows opened directly upon all the life and movement of this noisiest and gayest spot of Venice, curiously suggestive of Margate in the Cockney season, save that it is cosmopolitan instead of Cockney, and that instead of the Jew of Houndsditch one may meet the Jew from Damascus or Cairo, from Ispahan or Hungary, from Frankfort or Rome. Here all nations meet and mingle, and all tongues are heard in the voices that mix with the tramp of passing footsteps from morning till midnight. For people who want the silence of the city by the sea, this entresol would be hardly the choicest portion of Danieli's rambling caravanserai; but to Hetty's mind those windows opened on a scene of enchantment.

The fishing-boats were coming in, their painted sails gaudier than the sunset, and an Italian man-of-war was lying between the Riva and the Island church yonder. How familiar that church of St. George the Greater seemed to Hetty, and the Custom House, and the dome of Santa Maria della Salute. She had known them all her life in pictures and photographs—sham Canalettis, books of engravings—but the glory of light and colour were as new to her dazzled eyes as if she had died unawares and had come to life again in Paradise.



"Lovely, lovely; quite too lovely," was all she could say, not having a Ruskinesque vocabulary at her command.

When she looked round, appealing to her sister for sympathy in this new delight, it was a shock to find the room empty.

She ran into the adjoining bedroom, where Benson was unpacking, and then into her own little room further on; but there was no sign of Eve.

"She must have gone out for a stroll," Hetty said ruefully. "She might as well have told me she was going. She ought to know that I am dying to see St. Mark's."

Hetty knew her sister's dislike of all public rooms in hotels, so she had very little hope of finding her in any of those lounges—reading-room, hall, salon—which Signor Campi has provided for his guests. There was no doubt in Hetty's mind that Eve had gone to look at St. Mark's, before the twilight shadows began to veil the splendour of the façade. Hetty went back to the window, and amused herself with the perpetual movement on the quay, and on the water, man-of-war, P. and O., fishing-boats, barges, gondolas moving diagonally across the crimsoned water towards the crimson sky, light and colour reflected upon all things, save where the dark cool shadows accentuated that sunset splendour.

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## CHAPTER XVII.

"BOTH TOGETHER, HE HER GOD, SHE HIS IDOL."

PALE, quiet, resolute, with her mind made up as to what she had to do, Eve Vansittart crossed the Piazzetta towards Florian's Caffè, and slowly, very slowly, passed in front of the windows, looking at the loungers seated here and there at the marble tables, and wondering whether this was the scene of her brother's fate. She had not been told the name of the caffè. She only knew that it was at Venice, in Carnival time, and at a crowded caffè that the fatal encounter had happened.

She passed Florian's, and a door or two further on was assailed by a photographer, who wanted to sell her views of the city at five francs a dozen, and who would not believe that she could exist without them. She looked at him absently for a minute or two while he showed his views, expatiating upon their beauty and cheapness, and after that thoughtful pause went into his shop, seated herself, and turned over the leaves of an album of specimen photographs, choosing a dozen at random—"this—and this—and this"—without looking at them.

"Have you had this shop long?" she asked.

"Fifteen years."

"Then you must remember something that happened



in a caffè in the Piazza—Florian's, most likely—seven years ago. It was on a Shrove Tuesday, late at night. A young man was killed, accidentally, in a scuffle. Do you remember?"

The photographer shrugged his shoulders.

"That is a thing that might happen any year at Carnival time," he said lightly. "There is much excitement. Our people are good-natured, very good-natured, but they are hot-tempered, and a blow is quickly given, even a blow that may prove fatal. I cannot say that I remember any particular case."

"The man who was killed was an Englishman, and the man who killed him was an Englishman."

"Strange," said the photographer. "The English are generally cool and collected—a serious nation. Had it been an American I should be less surprised. The Americans are more like us. There is more quicksilver in their blood."

"Cannot you remember now? An Englishman, a gentleman, stabbed by an English gentleman," urged Eve. "Surely such things do not happen every day?"

"Every day? No, Signora. But in Carnival time one is prepared for strange things happening. I begin to recall the circumstance, but not very clearly. A young Englishman stabbed with a dagger that had been bought over the way a short time before. He had been drinking, and was furiously jealous of a young woman who was present. He attacked his compatriot with savage violence. Yes, I recall the affair more clearly now. There were those present who said he brought his fate



upon himself by his brutality. The man who stabbed him made a bolt of it, on a hint from a bystander—ran across the Piazzetta, jumped into the water, and swam for his life. No one in Venice ever knew what became of him. He must have been picked up by a gondola, and must have got away by the railroad. Who knows? He may have got ashore on the mainland, and made his way to Mestre, so as to avoid the railway station here, where the police might be on the watch for him. Anyhow, he got away. He had courage, quickness, his wits well about him.”

“It was at Florian’s that this happened?” asked Eve.

“Yes, at Florian’s—where else? There is no caffè in Venice equal to Florian’s.”

That was all. She paid for her photographs and went back to Florian’s, and peered in at the bright, pretty salons, where the Italians were lounging over their coffee, with here and there a group playing dominoes, and where tourists—English, American, German—were enjoying themselves more noisily. She wondered in which of those salons the tragedy had been acted. Was the stain of her brother’s blood on the floor ineffaceable, like Rizzio’s in the fatal room at Holyrood? She loitered for a few minutes, looking in through the open doors and windows shudderingly; and seeing she was observed, she moved quickly away, and presently was being followed across the piazza by a Venetian seeker of *bonnes fortunes*, she herself happily unconscious of the fact.

She looked at the shops in the Procuratie Vecchie, and was pestered by the touting shopkeepers after their



Venetian manner. She looked in at all those Eastern toys and Italian gewgaws, and jewellery which has here and there a suggestion of Birmingham.

"Do you sell daggers?" she asked a black-eyed youth, who had entreated her earnestly to ascend to the show-room above, assuring her that the "to look costs nothing."

Her question startled him. "Daggers, yes, assuredly. Was it a jewelled dagger for her hair that the Signora desired? He had of the most magnificent."

No. She wanted no dagger, only to know whether he sold them, real daggers, strong enough to wound fatally.

He showed her a whole armoury of Moorish knives, any one of which looked as if it might be deadly.

"Do you remember a young Englishman being killed with such a dagger as this?" she said, pointing to a jasper-handled knife, "by accident, in Carnival time?"

He remembered, or affected to remember, nothing.

Leaving his shop, after buying half a dozen bead necklaces for civility, Eve found herself face to face with her Venetian admirer, upon whom she turned so dark a frown as to repel even that practised Lothario. She hurried back to Danieli's, and arrived there flushed and breathless, and far too much exhausted to do justice to the simple little dinner of clear soup and roast chicken which Benson had ordered, a dinner served in her own sitting-room, which luxury of privacy was Eve's only extravagance in her travels.

Hetty questioned her sister closely, and reproached



her for unkindness in going out alone; but Eve gave her no explanation of that excursion.

"You are not strong enough to walk about alone, dear," the sister said tenderly. "You want a great giraffe like me to give you an arm." This was Hetty's way of alluding to the tall slim figure which had been so much admired on the tennis courts of St. Moritz and Maloja.

Eve engaged a gondola next morning. It was to be her own private gondola, and the gondolier was to give allegiance to no one else, so long as Mrs. Vansittart remained in Venice. She set out alone in her gondola directly after breakfast, in spite of Hetty's remonstrances.

"I have some business in Venice that I must keep to myself, Hetty. It will be the greatest kindness in you to ask no questions."

"You are full of mysteries," said Hetty, "but I won't tease you. Only take care of yourself, dearest, and don't be unhappy about anything, for the sake of the sisters who idolize you."

Eve kissed her, and went away without another word. Hetty had the whole morning to herself with Benson, who showed her St. Mark's and the pigeons, and the Doge's Palace, whisking her very speedily through all the picture-rooms, but not letting her off a single dark cell on either side the Bridge of Sighs.

Eve's first visit was to the chief office of the Venetian police, where she found an obliging functionary, who, at her desire, produced the record of the unknown



Englishman's death at Florian's Caffè on the night of Shrove Tuesday, 1885.

The story was bald and brief. A scuffle, ending in death, by a single wound from a dagger. The man who used the dagger had escaped. The weapon was still in the possession of the police.

"Was every means taken to find the man who killed him?" Eve asked.

"Every means, although there was no extra pressure put upon us to find him. Nobody came forward to identify the victim or to claim the body. He must have been a waif and stray; his name, Smith, is one of the commonest English names, I am told, and it may have been an assumed name in his case. He was a fine young fellow, but showed marks of having lived recklessly and drunk hard. The lines in his face were the lines that dissipated habits leave on young faces. It was a sad business. Has the Signora any personal interest in this unfortunate gentleman?"

"Yes, he was my relation. I have come to Venice on purpose to find his grave."

"That will be difficult, I fear. He belonged to nobody. His bones will have been mingled with other bones in the public grave ere now."

"Oh, that is hard," said Eve, in a broken voice. "A pauper's grave. He was a gentleman by birth and education. There were those in his own country who would have starved rather than let him lie in a nameless grave."

The official shrugged his shoulders with the true philosophical shrug.



“Does the Signora really think that it matters whether we have as grand a tomb as Titian or lie in some forgotten spot of earth? For my part, the finest monument that was ever set up would not console me for a short life. When these bones of mine are only aches and pains, and can carry me about no longer, away with them to the crematorium. The Signora will pardon me for venturing to state my own views, and if she desires it I will try to discover the exact circumstances of the Englishman’s burial. It is possible that there may have been some one interested in his last resting-place, and the grave may have been bought. There was a young Venetian, the girl who caused the quarrel, who seems to have been attached to him. She may have done something. If the Signora will be good enough to wait till to-morrow I may be able to furnish her with better information.”

Eve thanked him for his polite interest, and promised to recompense him for any trouble he might take on her behalf.

She received a letter from him the next morning.

“The grave is the last in the avenue leading due west by the side of the south wall in the cemetery at San Michele. There is a wooden cross, and the name Smith. The grave was bought and the cross erected at the expense of the Venetian girl.”

Eve’s gondola took her to the sea-girt burial-place in the bright noonday sunshine. She carried a basket of flowers, roses and narcissus, to lay upon her brother’s grave, and her mind was full of the hour when she saw



him for the last time. How near in its distinctness of detail, of sensation even; how far in that sense of remoteness which made her feel as if she were looking across a gulf of death and time to another life. Was that really herself—that impetuous girl, whose arms had clung round her brother's neck in the agony of parting, and who had never known any other love?

To-day there was a conflict of love. There was the thought of the man whose crime had been the crime of a moment, whose punishment was the punishment of a lifetime.

"I know that he loved me," she told herself. "I know that I was necessary to his happiness, and yet I sent him away from me. Could I do otherwise? No. The man who killed my brother could not be my husband, I knowing what he had done. Ah, as long as I did not know, what a happy woman I was! And I might have lived happy in my ignorance to the end but for my own fault."

And then with bitterest smile she said aloud—

"Oh, Fatima, Fatima, how dearly have you paid for the turning of the key!"

She found San Michele, the quiet island of the dead, sleeping in the soft haze of morning on the bosom of the lagune. A little way off, the chimneys of Murano were tarnishing the clear Italian sky with their smoke; the barges were loading and unloading; the glass-makers were passing to and fro; women and girls flip-flopping over the damp stones in their quarterless shoes; the children and the beggars were sprawling in the sun.



There the stir and variety of life: here the silence and the sameness of death.

She found her brother's grave, and the monument which Fiordelisa and her aunt had set up in his honour. The grave was a mound on which the grass grew tall and rank, as it grows at Torcello, above the ruins of the mother city. The monument—poor tribute of faithful poverty—was a wooden cross painted black, with an inscription in white lettering, rudely done:—

SIR SMIZZ  
MORTO A VENEZIA,  
MARTEDI-GRASSO, 1885.

Below this brief inscription were seven of those conventional figures—in shape like a chandelier-drop—which often ornament the funeral drapery that marks the house of death. These chandelier-drops, painted white on the black ground of the cross, represented tears. They were seven, the mystic number, sacred to every Catholic mind.

These seven tears—seven heart-wounds—were all the epitaph Lisa could give to her lover. A wreath of immortelles, black with the blackness of years, hung upon the cross. It dropped into atoms as Eve touched it, was blown away upon the salt sea wind, vanishing as if it had been the vision of a wreath rather than the thing itself.

Eve sank on her knees in the rank grass, in the hollow between two graves, and abandoned herself to a long ecstasy of supplication, praying not for the dead,



at peace beneath that green mound where the grasshoppers were chirping, and the swift lizards gliding in and out,—not for the dead, but for the man who killed him, for the conscience-burdened wanderer, under torrid suns, far from peace, and home, and all the pleasures and comforts of civilization, seeking forgetfulness in the arid desert, in the fever-haunted swamp, among savage beasts and savage men, going with his life in his hand, lying down to sleep at the end of a weary day, with the knowledge that if his camp-fires were not watched he might wake to find himself face to face with a lion. Oh, what a life for him to lead, for him whose days had been spent so pleasantly in the busy idleness of a man whose only occupation is the care of a small landed estate, and whose only notion of hard work is the early rising in the season of cub-hunting, or the strenuous pleasures of salmon-fishing beyond the Scottish border.

When her prayer was done—her prayer that her beloved might be sheltered and guarded by a Power which guides the forces of Nature, and bridles the neck of the lion, and can disperse the pestilence with a breath—prayer is a dead letter for those who believe not as much as this—Eve sat upon the grass, under her Italian umbrella, the red umbrella which all the peasants use as shelter from sun and rain, and abandoned herself to thoughts of the wanderer.

She knew more of his wanderings than she had hoped to know when Sophy's letter from Fernhurst first told her that he was travelling with a friend in the Mashona country; thanks to an occasional letter from his own pen which appeared in the *Field*, and over



which his wife hung with breathless interest, and read and re-read, returning to it again and again long after the date of publication, as she returned to *Hamlet* or "In Memoriam." Week after week she searched the paper eagerly for any new letter, or any stray paragraph giving news of the wanderer; but the letters appeared at long intervals, and the last was nearly three months old. He had turned his face homeward, he said, in that last letter. Her heart thrilled at the thought that he might have returned ere now, that he might be at Merewood perhaps, in the rooms where they had lived together, in the garden which was once their earthly Paradise, in which she had watched the growth of every flowering shrub, and counted every rose, in that mild Hampshire where roses flourish almost as abundantly as in balmy Devon. She thought of the tulip tree she had planted on their favourite lawn, he standing beside her as she bent to her work, laughingly prophetic of the day when they should sit on a rustic bench together under the spreading branches of that sapling of to-day, to accept the congratulations of garden-party guests upon their golden wedding.

"We must really go and speak to the old people," some pert young visitor would say to a perter granddaughter of the house, 'only one hardly knows what to say to people of that prodigious age.'"

Eve remembered her feeling of vague wonder what it was like to be old, whilst Vansittart jestingly forecast the future.

Well, all speculation of that kind was at an end now. She would never know what it was like.



"Those the Gods love die young," she repeated to herself, dreamily. "I would not mind dying—any more than Peggy minded, happy-souled Peggy—if I could but see him before I die. There could be no harm in my seeing him—just at the end—no treason to my flesh and blood lying here."

She laid her wasted cheek gently down on the mound, and let her tears mix with the last lingering dew on the long grass. She wanted to be loyal to her dead; but her heart yearned with a sick yearning for one touch from the hand of the living, for one look from the eyes that would look only love. Love, and pardon, and fond regret.

It was a fortnight after that morning in the cemetery at San Michele, that in poring over her *Field* Eve came upon a two-line paragraph at the bottom of a column, a most obscure little paragraph—side by side with one of those little anecdotes of intensest human interest which chill one at the end by the fatal symbol, "Advt."—a tiny scrap of news which any but the most searching reader would have been likely to overlook.

"Among the passengers on board the *City of Zanzibar*, which left Cape Town on the 3rd inst., for Alexandria and Brindisi, were Mr. Murthwait and Mr. Vansittart, returning from a hunting expedition to Lobengula's country."

Eve sent for her doctor that evening, the English doctor who had attended her at St. Moritz in January and February, and who was now taking a semi-professional holiday in Venice—willing to see old patients who



might have drifted to the city by the sea, but not desiring new ones.

She submitted patiently to the necessary auscultation, while her sister stood by, pale and breathless, waiting to hear the words of doom.

The doctor's face, when he laid down the stethoscope, was grave even to sorrowfulness. He had been warmly interested in this case in the winter, had hoped against hope.

"Am I worse than I was in February?" Eve asked quietly.

"I am very sorry to have to say it—yes, you are worse."

"And you think badly of my case? You think it quite hopeless?"

"There is no such thing as hopelessness," faltered the doctor, responding to an appealing look from Hetty. "You are so young—have such a fine constitution, and even after what you told me of your family history—who knows?—there is always a chance."

"Yes, there was a chance for my youngest sister," answered Eve, with a faint smile. "Peggy's chance lasted six months."

"If there is anything you want to settle—any business matter, such as the disposal of property, which makes your mind uneasy—it is always well to set such anxieties at rest," answered the doctor, soothingly.

"Yes, I must see to that. My settlement gives me the right to dispose of my property—the property my husband gave me. I had none of my own. But it is not of that I am thinking. Oh, doctor, be frank with



me. I have a reason for wanting to know. Do you think that I am dying?"

"Alas, dear lady! I cannot promise you many years of life."

"Or many months? Or many weeks? Oh, doctor, don't think I am afraid of the truth. I am not one of those consumptives who deceive themselves. I have no spurious hopes—perhaps because I do not set a great value on life. Only there is some one I want to see before I die."

"Send for him, then," said the doctor, divining that the some one was her husband. "Send for him, and set your mind at rest."

"I will," she answered resolutely, and before the doctor had left her half an hour she had written and despatched her telegram—

"John Vansittart, Steamer *City of Zanzibar*, Poste Restante, Brindisi.—I am at Venice, and would give much to see you on your way home.—Eve.—Danieli's."

The windows of Mrs. Vansittart's salon on the entresol at Danieli's opened upon a balcony—a balcony shaded and sheltered by a striped awning, under which Eve loved to sit at her ease, nestling among the cushions which Hetty arranged for her, on days when, in her own words, she felt hardly equal to the gondola. There had been many days since the despatch of that message to Brindisi when Eve had felt unequal to the gondola, and Hetty had by this time exhausted all the sights of Venice under the chaperonage of Benson—who gave herself as many airs as if she had been Ruskin—and



had yawned as heartily at the Accademia as ever she had done at the National Gallery. She had wearied of Titian and Tintoretto. She had tried her hardest to admire Carpaccio, and to pin her mind to her limp little piratical edition of the "Stones of Venice." She thought of Ruskin religiously every day as she tripped past Figtree Corner. More fondly, perhaps, did she affect the shops in the Merceria, and all those wonderful little streets which to the Cockney of mature years recall all that was most precious—that is to say, most characteristic of the little industries and little trades of a great city—in the vanishing alleys and paved courts between Leicester Square and Oxford Street. Here there was always something to interest the girl from Sussex; and the Rialto, market and bridge, afforded never-failing pleasure. Thus the gondolier had an easy time of it, and yawned and slept away the brightening hours, and basked in the sun, and fattened on golden messes of polenta.

It was quite true that Eve felt less capable of exertion—even that slight effort of going down-stairs and stepping from Danieli's doorstep into a gondola—than when first she came to Venice; but she had another and stronger reason for preferring her cushioned nest on the balcony to the Lido or the lagunes, lovely as those smooth waters were in the lovely May weather. She was waiting for the result of her telegram, she was watching for the coming of her husband. He would come to her. On that question she had no fear. If he lived to land at Brindisi and to receive her message, he would come to Venice. She would see him, and



forgive, and be forgiven, before she died. Forgive him; forgive the wrong done to another? For her own part there had never been anything less than pardon in her mind. She had made every excuse that love can make—love, the special pleader—the infallible advocate for a criminal at the court of a woman's conscience. She had excused his crime until it was no crime; but she had been firm in her conviction that she could not live with the man who killed her brother. Looking back now at the years of a double exile there was no wavering in her mind, no regret for what she had done. She felt only gratitude to Providence who had shortened the lonely years, and brought the end so near.

Three weeks of watching and waiting passed like a slow pensive dream—a dream of blue water—and lounging gondoliers—and flower-girls with baskets of ragged pink peonies, and the shriek and whistle of the steamer for the Lido, and the passing of many footsteps, and sound of many voices, grey-coated tourists, American and British, for ever coming and going, so light-hearted, so light-minded, so noisy, that one might think care and sorrow had no part in their lives or in their memories. To Eve, dwelling for ever on the memory of the life which had been, on the thought of the parting which was to be, all that tumultuous movement and gaiety seemed a thing of wonder.

"How happy they all are!" she said. "What a happy world it seems—for other people."

"Ah, but you see people must wear their happy side outermost," answered Hetty, "and I dare say even



Americans know what care means, though they always seem wallowing in money and new clothes. I wish you would come down to the hall to-night, and hear the little concert we have every evening, and see my favourite young lady from Boston. She has all her frocks from Worth or Redfern, and her waist is under nineteen inches. Yet she eats! Ah, what a privilege to be able to eat as much as she does, and yet keep one's waist under nineteen inches!"

The day had been almost oppressively warm, and the fishing-boats were coming home through a sea of molten gold in the unspeakable splendour of a Venetian sunset, when May has breathed the first breath of summer heat over land and water. Eve had been sitting in the balcony all day reading those little books of Howells' and his contemporaries, which seem especially invented for the traveller in fair countries, light, portable, dainty to touch and gracious to look upon, and eminently proper. She had read, and dreamed her waking dreams, and dozed a good deal at intervals—for her nights now were sadly broken, and sadly wakeful—quite as bad as poor Miss Margaret's nights, as Benson told her sympathetically. Miss Margaret? Who was Miss Margaret? And then Eve remembered how the respectful Benson had insisted on calling poor Peggy by a name which no other lips had ever addressed to her.

Benson was an admirable nurse, wakeful, watchful, really attached to her mistress; but she was just a shade too business-like, and too much inclined to look upon Eve as a case rather than an individual. She watched the symptoms of decay with a ghoulish gusto, and told



her mistress more about former patients than it was cheering for an invalid to know.

To-day, after the weariness of the night, and the long, long hours between the early dawn and the breakfast hour of civilization, Eve's fitful slumbers were sound and deep, deeper than dreamland, deep as the dark abyss of unconsciousness. She had been falling into this gulf now and again all day, falling suddenly from her book or her day-dream into that distant world of restfulness.

A cooler breeze sprang up with the sinking of the sun, and the water between the Riva and the island church was stirred into bolder ripples as the black boats stood sharply out against the reddening light. The salt breath of the Adriatic was blowing across the sandy bar yonder with revivifying freshness. Eve rose from her nest of down pillows in the low canvas chair, and stood leaning against the balcony, looking at the animated scene. There was a paper lantern lighted here and there with a pale fantastic light, in sickly contrast to that blaze of sunset colour, and as the crimson faded in the low western sky the little earthly lights brightened and grew bold, and there came the sound of that light music which Venetians love, music that seems only a natural accompaniment to the ripple of the incoming tide.

"How bright and gay it all looks!" said Eve. "Is there anything on earth to equal Venice? Oh, how strange that I should love this city so well!" she murmured, in self-reproach, remembering the purpose that had brought her there.



The charm of the city had crept upon her un-awares. She was glad to live there, glad that she was to die there.

She looked towards the bridge by the Doge's Palace, and saw a man walking quickly down the steps—a bearded man, with a brown skin and a weather-beaten look. He was coming quickly towards the hotel; he was looking up at the windows, scanning the wide frontage with a sweeping glance, now high, now low, till his eyes lighted on the balcony where she stood, lighted on herself, and never unfixed their gaze.

Changed as he was, she had known him from the first instant. She had known him when he appeared at the top of the steps for John Vansittart and no other. There was something in his walk, something in the carriage of his head, something which to the eyes of love seemed to distinguish him from all the rest of the world—characteristics that would have been invisible to all other eyes.

He ran towards the low doorway, and scarcely had he vanished from the outer world below when she heard a door bang at the end of the corridor and the rush of hurrying feet. How quick, how impetuous, what a creature of fire and flame he seemed as he dashed into the room and clasped her in his arms.

"Are these your African manners?" she gasped, laughing and crying in the same moment.

"Oh, my love, my love, how sweet to hold you on my heart again and be forgiven! I am forgiven, am I not, dear? My calamity, or my crime—call it what you



will—is forgiven. Oh, love, I have suffered. I have drunk the cup of atonement."

She was sobbing upon his shoulder, her face hidden, as she clung to him, with wasted arms wreathing his neck. In the blindness of his joy—for joy, like fortune, is stone blind—he had not noticed how pitiably thin those caressing arms had grown. Suddenly, scared by her silence, he withdrew himself from that caress, and held her from him at arm's length, and, looking into her face, saw the sign manual of death, and knew why she had summoned him.

By a heroic effort he commanded his countenance, and smiled faintly back her own faint smile.

"There is no forgiveness between you and me," she said, "only love, a world of love."

He drew her to his breast again, cradling the thin cheek against his brown and bearded countenance, holding her to him as if he would never let go his hold, would hold her there against the grim assailant Death, breathing his own strong life into her as their lips met and their breath mingled. Surely between them there was life and vigour enough to ward off Death.

"My darling, my darling, my darling!"

It was all that he could say just yet. The rapture of reunion, the agony of an unspeakable dread were storming heart and mind. He felt like a man lashed to the mast in a hurricane, all the forces of Nature warring round him, unable to measure his danger or his chance of rescue.

To have her, to hold her again, loving him as of



old. And then to lose her! But must he lose her? Could neither love nor science work a miracle, and snatch her from the jaws of the Destroyer?

He grew calmer presently, and they sat side by side in the deepening shadows, and began to talk to each other quietly, in soft hushed voices, while the music and the voices of the Riva mixed with their half-whispered sentences, and the footsteps went by with a gay spring in them as if all Venice were hurrying from pleasure to pleasure.

"Oh, dearest, it was time you sent for me; it was time," he said. "You have given me a long penance. Nothing but Africa could have helped me to bear my life. In a world less full of strange hazards I must have lost patience with calamity, and made a swift and sudden end of myself. Thanks to the Dark Continent I have lived somehow, as you see, and come back a semi-savage, a creature of thews and sinews."

"No, you are only rougher looking and browner. I can see the soul shining through your eyes. Africa has not altered that."

"But you, dear love," he said, with a thrill in his voice that marked the strangled sob, "you are altered. You are looking tired and ill. I am afraid you have been neglecting yourself. I shall take you to the Engadine, where we ought to have taken poor Peggy. The Riviera was a mistake. A winter at St. Moritz would have cured her. We will start to-morrow."

She did not answer for a minute or so, but nestled nearer to him, with her wan cheek leaning against his shoulder, and her waxen fingers clasping his strong



wrist, hardened and roughened by hard weather and hard toil.

"The Engadine can do nothing for me, Jack—no more than it could have done for Peggy. South or north, mountain or valley, the end would have been the same. It is our family history, Jack. We were doomed from our birth. I was sent to the Engadine last winter, and Hetty and I only left St. Moritz in March. We stayed at Varese for nearly a month, and then came here. Hetty is with me, so bright, so active, so happy; but some day perhaps she will look in the glass as I have looked, and will see the summons written on her face. Dear husband, don't be too sorry for me. This parting must have come, even if we had escaped the other, even if I had never known what happened at Florian's; never knelt beside my brother's grave in the island cemetery. Let me lie near him, Jack: and whatever your future life may be—and God grant it may be blessed, you have suffered enough for your sin—think of me sometimes; and sometimes, in your wanderings, go to San Michele and look upon my grave."

He clasped her close against his heart, with a shuddering sigh.

Two days after, he took her away from the life and movement of the Riva to a palace on the Grand Canal, where the quiet of the Silent City had a soothing influence on her overwrought spirit. If any life could have been happy in which the inevitable end was so near, theirs would have been happy in that delicious beginning of the Venetian summer, a season when mere



existence is a privilege. Whatever love which passeth understanding can do to smooth the last days of a fading life was done for Eve; and it may be that the footsteps of the invincible Enemy were slackened somewhat by that unsleeping watchfulness.

The end came slowly, and not ungently, and till the end her husband was her devoted nurse and companion, thinking no thought that was not of her.

THE END.



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# Tauchnitz Edition.

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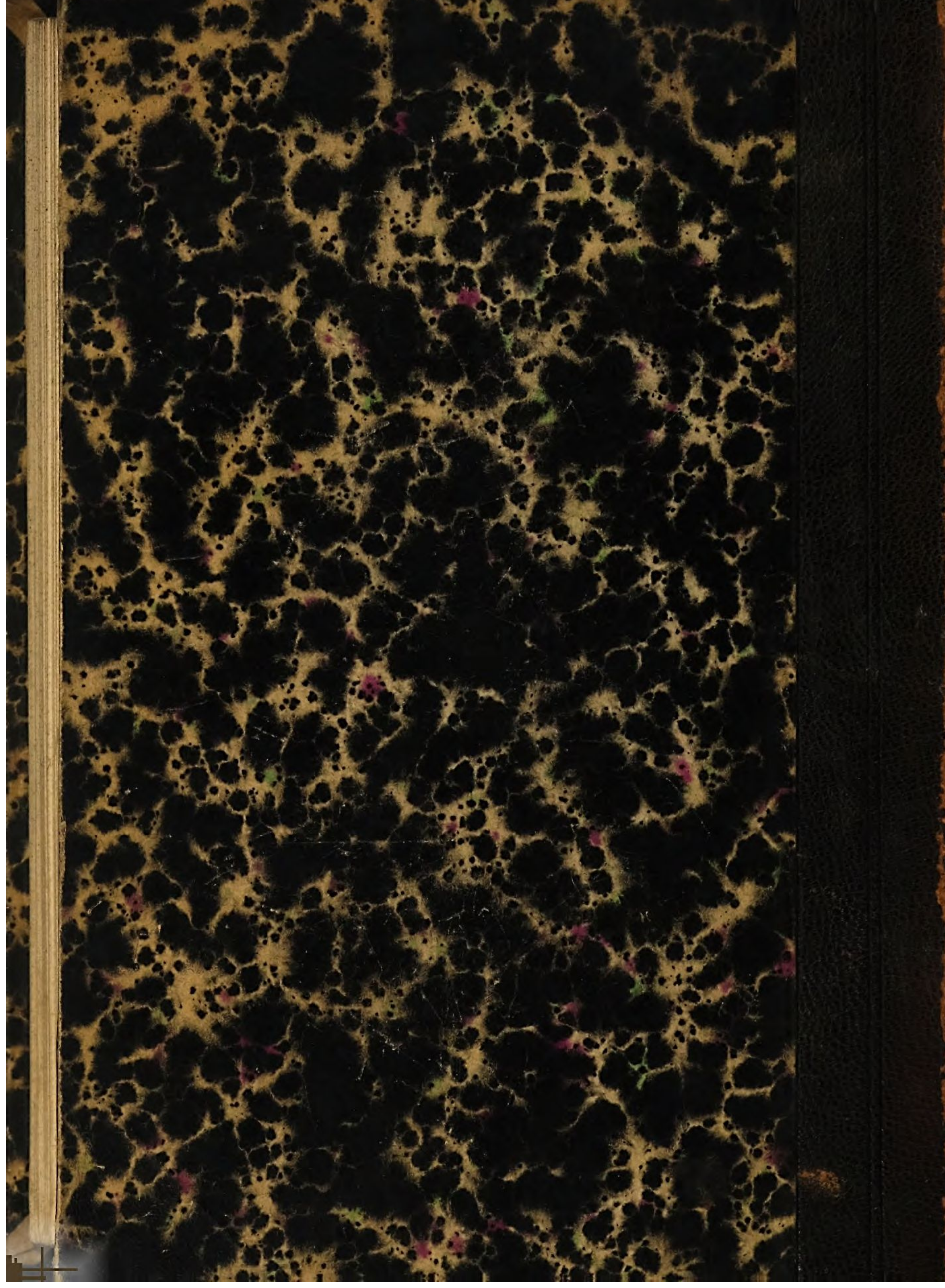






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